

Boogiepop Overdrive: The King of Distortion

Kouhei Kadono

VISIT...

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Boogiepop 5
NOVEL

Boogiepop
Overdrive
—The King of Distortion—

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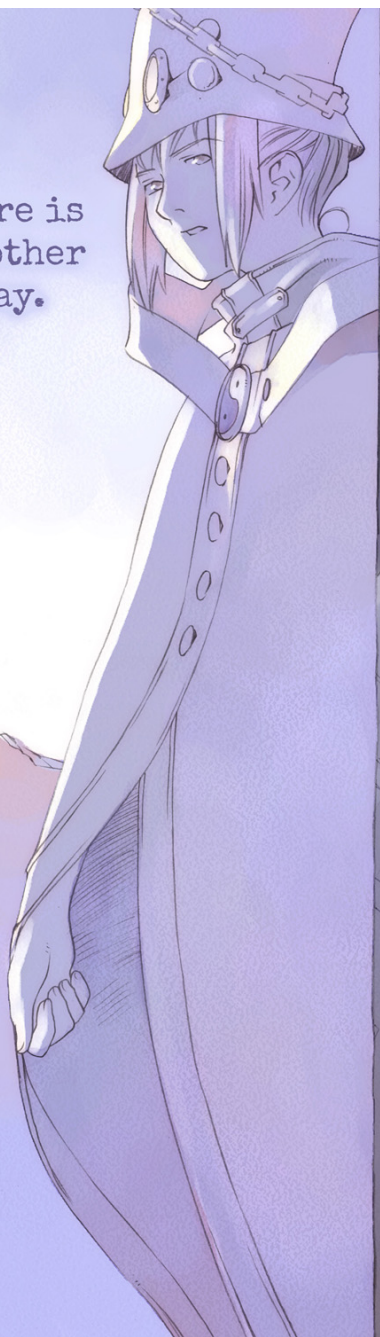
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Boogiepop
Overdrive
— THE —
KING OF DISTORTION

BY
Kouhei
Kadono

TRANSLATED BY
Andrew
Cunningham

There is
no other
way.

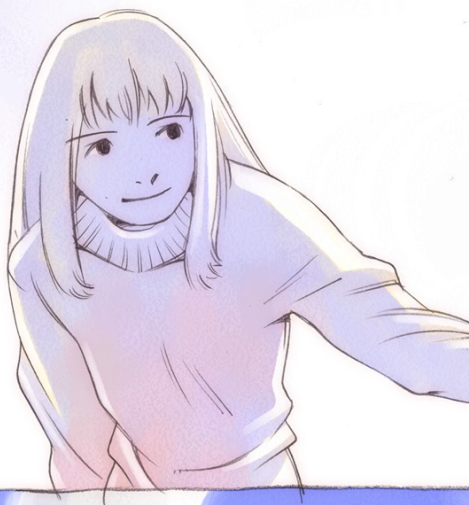


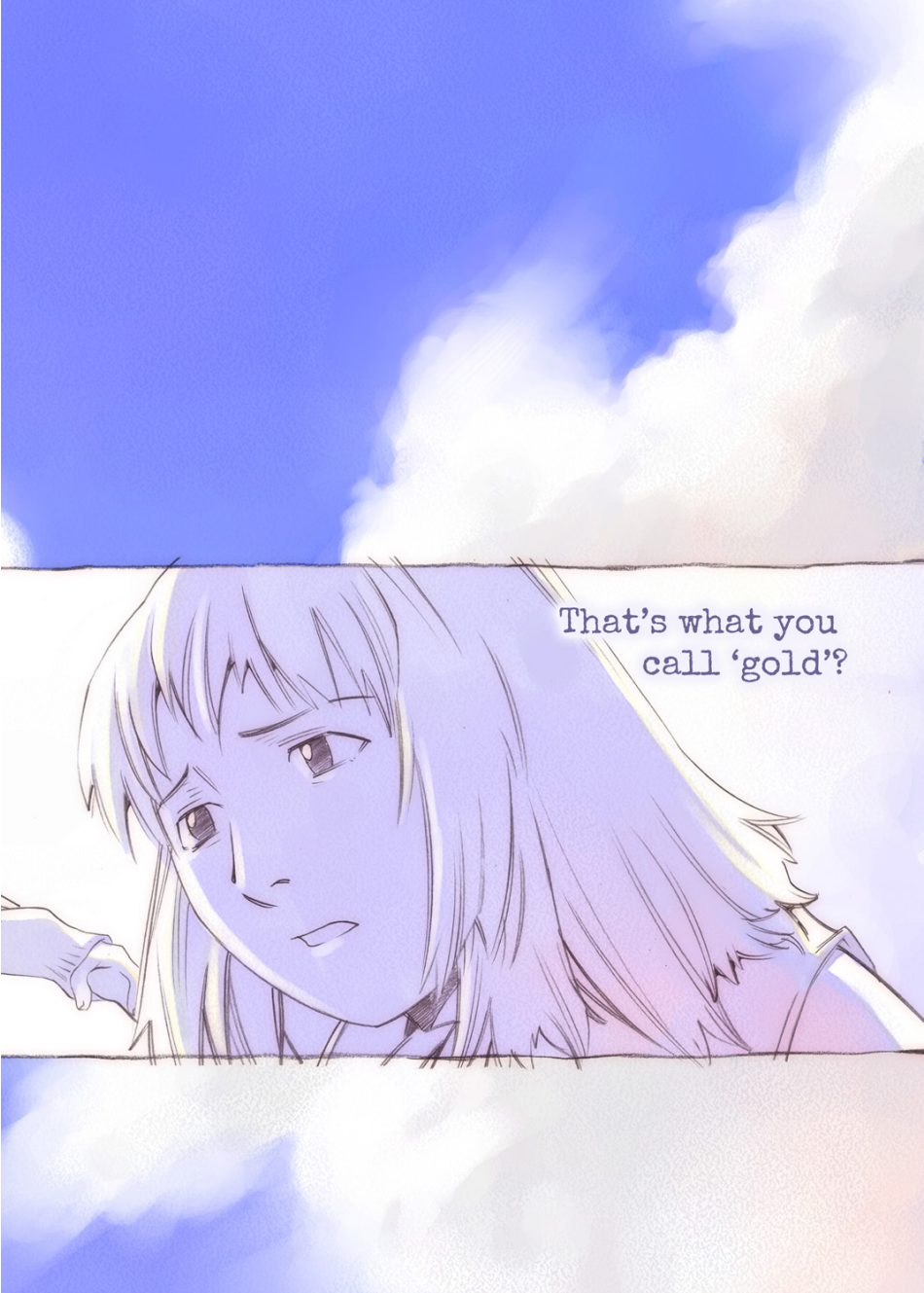


Y-you're gonna fight?



That's whatever
you feel has
that shine.





That's what you
call 'gold'?

I...I'm...





So...what
are you
thinking
now?



Where
are you...?

I am
everywhere,
and I am
nowhere.

BOOGIEPOP OVERDRIVE: THE KING OF DISTORTION
BOOGIEPOP • OVERDRIVE WAIKYOKUO

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Hope, despair, joy, grief, love, hatred, ecstasy, loathing, heaven,
hell, the past, the future, yesterday, today, tomorrow, dreams,
nightmares and the world...

All made by man.

And what man made, man can destroy.

—Kirima Seiichi, *Sickness in the Air*

This day will last
A thousand years
If you want it to

—Moody Blues, *Days of Future Passed*

8:24 A.M.

Sunday, February 14th.

It was going to be a beautiful day. The morning sky was so clear it seemed to stretch on forever.

“Mom, I have to pee,” Hashizaka Makoto said, tugging at his mother’s skirt.

“Oh, no. Can’t you hold it?” Shizuka asked crossly. She and her son were waiting in line together.

He shook his head. “I’m gonna burst,” he said, pouting.

Shizuka opened her mouth to scold him, but he cut her off.

“I can go alone. Okay? I’ll come right back.”

“Fine. You know where it is?”

“We passed it on the way.” Makoto nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

“Make it snappy!” Shizuka said.

Makoto pretended not to hear this.

The Moon Temple loomed behind them, and would open its doors today at ten.

This veritable Tower of Babylon was the last project left behind by Teratsuki Kyoichiro, a legend in his time. The self-made billionaire made significant contributions to all kinds of fields. But now that he was dead, he’d left behind a mountain of debt, and no one wanted to inherit the maintenance fees to keep this building going. It was scheduled for demolition in a month. Until then, it was briefly open to the public, and charging admission.

“.....”

Makoto looked up at it through the public toilet’s window. The Moon Temple didn’t have a single window anywhere.

“It’s weird,” he decided. He was eight, and not one to hide his true feelings.

His mother Shizuka had brought him here, but not by choice.

Normally, she would never take him anywhere no matter how much he begged her to, but here they were on the first day, waiting in line. He was vaguely aware that some twisted emotion brought her here, and he found it suffocating. He'd used the bathroom visit as an excuse to get away.

Makoto left the bathroom. He didn't want to go back, but if he didn't, Shizuka would be mad at him.

"Argh... I don't wanna be here," he muttered, glaring up at the building.

He hoped a giant monster would show up and smash the building to pieces.

A man standing near him chuckled. "You get dragged here against your will, kid?"

Makoto looked up at the speaker, baffled.

He seemed like a young man, but reminded Makoto of an important older man from a TV show. At his age, even junior high school students looked super old, but this man was far more mature and comfortable in his own skin than any of them.

Staring at the man, he felt like the noise of the crowd was fading away. Like the space a few meters around Makoto and this man had been sliced off from the world, sent into its own pocket dimension. The best comparison his eight-year-old mind could come up with was like when you were playing hide-and-seek and found a great hiding spot—so good that no one could find you no matter how long you waited.

"Who are you, old man?"

He had no idea how old this man was, so he swung for the fences.

"Old? I'm still young!"

"But you're older than me."

The man laughed. Even the way he laughed made him seem like someone "important."

"Well, I may look old. But I've actually only just been born."

"That's dumb. There's no way!" Makoto scoffed.

The man laughed again. "Hehe...but nothing in this world is guaranteed to be what it seems, kid. Everything is distorted or twisted somehow."

That was a strange thing to say.

Makoto was losing interest fast. This was one of those adults who liked to make fun of kids, he decided. He turned his back and started walking towards his mother.

That's weird...

He turned back, but there was no sign of the man.

There were clouds filling the sky; what had been clear and blue a few minutes earlier now had a shadow cast upon it.

“...?”

Makoto frowned. He felt like there'd been something weird about that man's eyes. It was like they didn't react to the light at all. Like there was nothing reflected in them.

Hashizaka Makoto had been the first person to meet the King of Distortion.

8:45 A.M.

W*hoa, the line's already this long?*

I glared balefully at the line wrapped two and a half times around the Moon Temple. I'd overslept a little, but it wasn't even nine yet! Admissions started at ten, so there were sure a lot of bored people in this world. Lots of couples, too. It was February 14th, Valentine's Day, so they should all just go give each other chocolate where I couldn't see them—sour grapes on my part, I guess. I was in love with a girl, but I couldn't see Kirima Nagi ever showing the slightest interest in exchanging chocolate. I'm pretty sure she didn't even register me as a man. Damn it all.

"Tch...oh well," I muttered, and grabbed a place at the end of the line.

"Oh, Habara-san!" A voice came from the inner circle, a lap ahead of me in line. "Habara Kentaro-san, right?"

I turned to look, and saw a dude named Tanaka Shiro waving at me. He was a year younger than me, but we'd known each other as kids.

"Yo, Shiro!"

This was my chance. I went over to him, totally jumping the line. The people behind us scowled, but I ignored them.

"Haven't seen you since junior high!"

"That's right. How's school going, Habara-san? I hear your place is pretty uptight. Is the stress getting to you at all?"

"Yeah...I'm handling it. Had my share of trouble, but it worked out okay."

Shiro looked like your classic pretty boy. But since I'd last seen him he'd grown up a bit. There was a little more darkness there—in a good way.

"You here alone? No date?" I asked.

He gave me a sad smile, and said, "You could call it a date."

But there wasn't anyone here with him.

I must have looked confused, because he added, "I was supposed to be here with a girl, but she... she couldn't be here. So I came alone."

He was maintaining a decent poker face, but I saw some real grief behind it.

"She die?"

"I'm not sure. Probably."

He nodded, and jerked his thumb up at the Moon Temple.

"We walked past this place together when they were building it. She said she wanted to come here someday. I just...remembered that last night. That's why I'm here. So... to me, it's a date."

"R-right..."

This was awkward. Maybe I was in the way.

"Th-then, I should..." I began.

But Shiro said, "I'd like it if you joined me, Habara-san."

"Y-you're sure?"



“She always liked crowds. But on my own... well. You know a lot about high-tech stuff, right? Fill me in, please.”

He was smiling again.

“S-sure. I can do that.”

It didn't feel right to turn him down. Shiro wasn't one to say things he didn't mean.

“Hmm...but where to start?”

“The guy who built the place died recently, right? Teratsuki, was it?”

He pointed at the tower behind us again.

“Yeah...Teratsuki Kyoichiro's folly. Might well be the best explanation for it.”

Teratsuki Kyoichiro.

The man was more than a mere genius—his very name had become a synonym for “monster.”

At age twenty-four, he struck gold after founding an accessory company. He then used his newfound cash to move into a completely unrelated field, starting a large-scale delivery company able to transport packages anywhere on the globe. That was a success, too, and after that he did whatever he wanted. His company, Moon Communications Enterprises (MCE for short) had fingers in every industry there was. There were even rumors they were making weapons abroad. They were especially good at intelligence gathering, and always knew when and where to make a move. Even the starting point, the delivery service, seemed to have been founded because he planned to make use of it later.

But all this success was not because he'd gathered a skilled staff around him. Teratsuki Kyoichiro never created any sort of brain trust or advisory board. MCE was never even publicly traded. It was a private company, with no executive staff. He managed all of its divisions on his own.

So when he suddenly died six months ago, at only fifty-six, there was nothing to be done. He had no successor, not even anyone who had a firm grasp on the exact scale of his company. Teratsuki had no family,

no dependents of any kind.

Wherever possible, middle management took over affiliate companies, and wherever not, they were disbanded.

And the latter group included this giant information management system tower, the Moon Temple, his very own Tower of Babylon.

As a building, it was downright bizarre. It was 157 meters tall, but contained nothing resembling floors. To keep it operating properly would cost several billion yen a month. Besides, the land it stood on was Teratsuki's property. Taking possession of it would cost a fortune in inheritance tax, and nobody wanted to assume that burden.

"But since the thing is here, and they're in need of extra funds to resolve the mess Teratsuki Kyoichiro left behind, they've delayed demolition for a month to show it off, earning money off admissions. The prefectural governor and the tax office and...all kinds of groups are involved."

"Wow..." Shiro said, dumbfounded. "So they built the thing, but nobody really knows what to do with it?"

"I'm sure Teratsuki Kyoichiro had plans... like creating a giant network linking information from across the globe. Up there with the New York stock exchange. But the way things are going, information is going to fragment, not concentrate. They'll compensate for that by allowing us access wherever we are. Teratsuki Kyoichiro should have known that better than anyone, so I really have no idea what he was thinking."

"His 'folly', then? The word fits," Shiro nodded, impressed.

We heard a stir ahead of us in line, and Hopper-kun, the mascot character of the accessory company that had gotten MCE started, was passing out balloons. The costume was basically a giant insect, but didn't really look much like a grasshopper.

"He started with that thing, and turned into a real monster," I said, gazing at Hopper-kun's giant, goofy eyes. The costume had been well used, and was worn and threadbare. It wasn't balanced well, and the head was swaying back and forth.

"But that's just how the world is," Shiro said. "The very beginning of anything is always laughably precarious."

The blue skies were growing swiftly cloudy. I didn't like the look of those clouds.

“Is it gonna rain...?” I wondered, looking up at them.

9:02 A.M.

“Quite a line,” I muttered, passing by the Moon Temple event.

Guess it was opening day.

I, Takeda Keiji, didn’t have any business at this event, so I just walked right past it. I had a date to get to.

My girlfriend, Miyashita Touka, and I had both been pretty busy lately, so we hadn’t seen nearly enough of each other. But today... well, embarrassingly enough, it was the one-year- anniversary of when we started dating, on Valentine’s Day. So we both made time to meet.

We were going to the same high school, yet we hadn’t seen each other in nearly two weeks.

She was taking her entrance exams next year and was really ramping up the studying.

Meanwhile, I’d already earned all required credits, and was just waiting to graduate. I was going straight from school to the design agency I worked at, and piling on the hours there.

So, we’d barely spoken until she called.

“Can we? I know you’re busy, senpai.”

“Hmm...”

“I haven’t done *anything* but study. We gotta at least enjoy Valentine’s Day, right?”

“Fair enough. I’ve definitely missed you.”

“Really?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Really really?”

“L-Let’s do this! Where should we meet?”

“What about the place we first met?”

“Yeah, that works. 9:30?”

“Cool!”

I hadn't heard her sound that happy in a while.

So here I was, in the clearing outside a famous department store, waiting.

I was nearly half an hour early, but I always was. Meanwhile, Touka was always late...

But if she's just late, that's no big deal.

I winced at the memory.

She'd done far worse. Completely blown off a date... while I transformed into someone else.

Four months since then... how time flies.

I found myself thinking about *him* again.

He was pretty weird.

He liked to speak in grandiose proclamations. I had no idea where any of it came from. They always rattled me, but I admired how free his mind was.

I sometimes wanted to see him again. But when he was out, Touka was gone, and I remained conflicted about that part.

And...if I take him at his word, when he shows up, the world is in danger. I don't want to put the world at risk just to see the guy again...

I chuckled under my breath. Why was I thinking about something this dumb?

Then, drops of rain started falling from the sky.

The clouds had started looking dubious several minutes ago, and the weather forecast had called for rain, so I took refuge in the entrance hall of the department store. I took a seat on a nearby bench. I had a good view of the square out front, so if Touka showed up I'd see her.

I heard a crowd getting excited off in the distance. I perked my ears, and heard a loudspeaker saying, "Due to rain, we'll be opening early..."

Must be that event at the Moon Temple. The people in line must be thrilled.

Was it really worth seeing? Weren't they just going to wander around a building that was going to be knocked down anyway? I'd heard the design of it was something else, so I suppose if you were a big

architecture buff or something...

Maybe we should check it out?

My mentor at work (also my boss) often said that if anything caught my attention, I should take the time to analyze it, to broaden my horizons. That I should never dismiss something as boring out of hand.

If Touka says she's interested, I guess we could go. But I don't want to wait in line today... been way too long since we saw each other. I just want to talk a while...

My thoughts were going in circles.

I was feeling pretty sleepy. I'd been up all night getting enough work done to justify the day off.

Crap. I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs, but it just got worse, so I stood up and bought some coffee from the vending machine. It served it up black in a paper cup, and I went to take a sip.

But as I looked down at the surface of that black liquid, raising it to my lips...



My reflection in the coffee shifted. Ripples distorting it.

The face staring back at me was *his* face, wearing that tall black hat.

“Wh...?!”

“Hello, Takeda-kun,” The reflection spoke. “If you want to see me that badly, you can see me anytime.”

“.....”

I froze, unable to move.

“It’s simple. I appear when the world is in danger. All you have to do is threaten the world.”

And then—and this was the most impossible thing of all—he *smiled*.

In that instant, I was sure he was a fake.

He’d never once given me anything like a smile.

“Wh-who are you? I don’t know you!” I shouted.

His smile broadened. “I am the King of Distortion. I was born to turn this world to gold...”

Another ripple ran across the surface, and he was gone.

I gulped, and found myself standing like an idiot with a cup of coffee in my hand.

Nobody was staring at me funny, so I must not have yelled aloud.

...was that a dream?

It had to be. Had I fallen asleep standing up, and started dreaming? But...

But...if that’s all it was then why... why am I...?

I was covered head to toe in a cold sweat.

9:26 A.M.

Ew, rain!”

I was on my way to turn in an application to a cram school, but now I hastily took cover inside the nearest building.

I rummaged through my bag, looking for the folding umbrella I swore I'd put in there.

But then my hands froze.

There was a boy standing in front of me. He seemed out of it, like he hadn't noticed me standing there. He drained the paper cup in his hand, then went back to the bench behind him.

I fled before he saw me. I didn't actually need to run away, but I did anyway.

The boy's name was Takeda Keiji-san.

I'm Niitoki Kei, President of the Student Discipline Committee at Shinyo Academy, a private high school. And he's the boy who recently broke my heart.

No—maybe not that recently. It was like six months ago. But to me it still felt like just the other day.

I'm extremely short, and look young—people often think I'm still in elementary school. I don't know if that has anything to do with me not being able to get over this, though. My friends all think I'm great at compartmentalizing, so I must look like I'm handling it well, but that's just on the outside. I'm doing no such thing.

“Hahh, hahh...”

The sound of my own breathing snapped me out of it. I was running around, out of breath, bag open... I hadn't even pulled the umbrella out.

“I'm an idiot.”

The rain was still coming down, so I found the umbrella and opened it. But I was already soaked through. I dabbed my hair a bit with a handkerchief, feeling gloomy. How much sadder could one girl be?

There was a lot of commotion going on around me.

Right, I'd heard about this... there was some event starting today at the Moon...something. I was too busy studying for entrance exams to pay attention to that sort of thing.

There was a long line of people filing into some weird-looking building. Guided by some poor souls dressed as Hopper-kun. That must be the worst job, I thought. How hot did those costumes get?

Lots of couples. Just looking at them annoyed me.

...none of my business.

I sighed and turned to forlornly hand in my application to the cram school, my world devoid of dreams.

But I only took a single step before I froze in my tracks.

There was a girl standing at the crossing ahead of me. She had a large Spalding sports bag slung over her shoulder. My classmate, Miyashita-san.

“.....”

She was staring up at the sky.

Or not the sky—maybe she was staring at the building.

But for Miyashita Touka to be here made no sense at all. She was Takeda-senpai's girlfriend. She should be heading to meet him.

And that glint in her eyes wasn't what you'd expect from any girl out on a date.

I gasped. I'd seen her—or rather, someone with her face—with this exact same expression. And not under ordinary circumstances.

N-no way...

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than she spun and ran across the crosswalk. Away from where senpai was waiting.

“W-wait, Miyashita-san?!”

Concerned, I moved to run after her.

But there was no need.

Seconds later, a figure stepped out of the shadows.

Black lipstick on a white face. A black hat, and a black cloak, wrapped around the whole body so their silhouette looked like a pipe. A

look I knew only too well—



“B-Boogiepop?!”

That name was a legend. Rumors spread among the girls in the area. A shinigami, identity unknown, said to kill people when they were at their most beautiful, before they had a chance to grow ugly.

And Boogiepop had the same face as Miyashita-san. I was decidedly less certain if he shared her gender.

Boogiepop flew past me like the wind, slipping through the crowd. He opened a door on the side of the strange building—a hidden door, one that looked just like part of the wall—and went in. An employee exit?

But nobody seemed to think this was the least bit strange. With that getup, maybe they just assumed Boogiepop was part of the event.

“W-wait! Stop!”

I knew better. Kirima Nagi had told me what made him appear.

This meant the world was in danger.

“Excuse me! Let me through! I work here!”

With this lie, I cut through the crowd, chasing Boogiepop. I’d been working with the discipline committee a while now, and knew just how to give my voice the right level of authority.

Everyone bought the lie and stepped out of the way. I hopped over the fence and went inside the building.

It was like being slapped in the face with cold water.

I continued inside...

9:34 A.M.

W*as that Niitoki?*

I was surprised as I watched her push through the line and slip in through a side entrance.

“Yo, Sakiko, what’s up?” said the guy next to me, vacantly.

“.....”

I didn’t answer, but just kept glaring at the entrance Niitoki Kei had gone through.

Her? Work here?

No way in hell.

From what I’d heard, she was the head of the discipline committee at Shinyo Academy. That place would never let girls take part-time jobs. There was no reason for her to be going in an employee entrance now.

That girl and I, Michimoto Sakiko, had been together in elementary school and junior high, and she was as stuck-up and serious as I wasn’t. Since she was still presiding over committees, I doubted that had changed at all.

But for her to lie her way in...?

“What for?”

“Hunh?” The guy said, in that same vacant tone.

His name was Takeshi, just some dude from my school, not my boyfriend or anything. I was only here with him because he had tickets and I’d been wanting to go. He probably thought this was a date, but I certainly didn’t.

“Nothing.”

I decided it was pointless to think about, and took my eyes off the door. It blended perfectly into the wall. The line started moving again, so I had to move with it.

“I saw some weird cosplay character a minute ago... What was that about? Never seen him before. You know him, Sakiko?”

“Was there? I didn’t see him.”

“Yeah, he was like, super fast. Didn’t get a good look, but his face was all pale, with a black hat.”

“What, like Boogiepop?”

“Hunh? Like what?”

“Never mind.”

He wouldn’t know. That legend was only passed around among girls. I didn’t want to explain it to him. I kinda liked those stories, so the last thing I wanted to do was let some random dude in on the secret, whether he got into it or just made fun of it.

Takeshi said something else, but I didn’t bother answering.

As we rounded the building, I looked up at the Moon Temple. It was so weird.

The Moon Temple was a tall building, but didn’t have a single window anywhere. Instead, there were vents, and weird eyeball things that gathered outside light via optical fibers. The shape of the building seemed normal at first, but if you looked closer you’d see it was all twisted. The higher up it went, the more it tilted, and the top floor was at a 90 degree angle to the ground. It was pitch black, like a deep-sea fish.

“It stays upright even though it’s all bent. It was designed so parts of it maintain tension with each other, using cutting-edge experimental construction techniques. Techniques nobody else would ever want to use.”

Takeshi was blithering on, but I didn’t care about any of that.

This building was *weird*.

It didn’t fit in at all, but here it was, like it owned the place.

That, I liked.

That drew me to it.

It was a waste to knock it down.

Maybe I didn’t actually want to go in. Maybe I didn’t need to.

But the only way I’d ever be part of this was if I got a ticket and went inside. If just gazing at it from the outside and nodding to myself was enough, I wouldn’t need to be standing here with this boor, but...if

I didn't go in that would leave me...sad? Unsure of my own sensibilities? Pathetic either way, but that's who I was.

I wasn't anything special. Not like Niitoki Kei.

...forget about her, already!

I shook my head, driving her out of my mind.

"What's up?"

Shut up! Every single time...

"Oh...nothing."

How many times did I have to say it?

I was sure this guy wanted more from me. I knew that, but...I just didn't care.

About twenty minutes after the line started moving, we finally made it to the entrance.

"Seems like a waste to go in," I muttered.

"Hunh? Don't be ridiculous," Takeshi scoffed. Of course he did.

Inside the doors, it looked like the entrance lobby of any other building. But if you looked closely, the weirdness was only just beginning.

The floor had a number of gentle steps to it, gradually rising upwards. Toward the back, it began to bend.

This building had no discrete floors.

All the levels were instead connected by one long staircase.

There was a ramp to the side, presumably for wheelchair access.

An announcement directed people to the line for the elevators to the left. They were doing some sort of Hyper Visual Virtual show or whatever at the top of the building, and the elevators were for people who'd come only to see that.

"Let's get in line," Takeshi said.

"Why?" I said. "Let's walk up. We're here, after all."

"What a pain... It's all gonna look the same."

"But..."

Why would we just come inside to line up again? It made no sense

to skip part of it.

That was the entire point of this event. We were here to remember a modern monument before it was lost forever.

“What are you, a little kid? Gotta conquer the whole building? Don’t be so stubborn,” Takeshi teased.

“Then suit yourself!” I snapped. “I’ll go alone.”

I tried to walk away.

“H-hold on...what did I do?”

Takeshi grabbed my arm. What gave him the right?

“Let go of me!” I hissed.

He did.

“Wh-what are you so mad about?”

“Whatever.” I stalked away, mingling with the crowd heading for the climb.

Takeshi tried to follow me, but he waited too long and lagged behind. I didn’t look back, so I wasn’t sure how far.

Honestly, who cares?!

Fuming, I climbed alone until I rounded the first corner and saw a bench. I sat down. I was too angry to walk straight.

Someone next to me was giggling. They were laughing at me, so I glared at them.

“What?”

Two boys were sitting there.

One looked like a bit of a wimp, but the other was pretty tall. He was the one laughing.

“N-no, just... not every day you see such a cliché fight. Right, Shiro?” the tall one chuckled.

The other one squirmed. “Habara-san, don’t say that...”

“Nah, sorry, sorry. I just saw myself in him. The girl I love won’t give me the time of day, either.” Habara-san was still laughing through his “apology”.

“.....”

I couldn't be bothered responding, so I just looked the other way. They soon moved on.

"....."

I took a deep breath and started to calm down.

I finally looked around and let out a little gasp.

"Wow...!"

I'd been too mad to notice, but the interior was really fancy.

First, there were the lights.

The whole place was lit up with light so natural it was hard to believe we were indoors, in a building with no windows. The optical fibers brought light in from the outside, directing it this way and that. Unless you looked closely, it was hard to tell where the light was even coming from. It seemed like it was coming from the countless grooves on the ceilings and walls, but I couldn't be sure.

And those grooves ran up and down and diagonally, all over the place, while the floor was a gentle staircase. It made it impossible to tell what was level and what was sloped.

Such a bizarre place.

The walls were painted a dim, mottled green. Come to think of it, I think someone had explained, "The interior is designed to ease people's tensions by eliminating all sense of geographic order." I think it was Takeshi who said it, so I hadn't really been listening.

There were a number of monitors lining the walls, displaying different explanations or animated images. These square boxes didn't match the rest of the interior; it seemed likely they'd been brought in for this event. Whatever equipment the original purpose of this building had required had probably never been installed.

I was starting to enjoy myself. I was glad I'd come. The interior was just as weird as the outside.

I even considered waiting for Takeshi to find me.

Then someone slipped silently through the narrow gap between the back of my bench and the wall. I only noticed because of the wind; they left no other sign.

"...mm?"

I turned to look.

And...there he was.

Boogiepop, wrapped in a black cape.

“.....”

He really was dressed just like the rumors said. He was moving between the passage and the wall without a sound, slipping through the flow of the crowd.

His face... you could take it for a man's face, or for a woman's. He wore make-up, his face painted white, with black lipstick.

“Ah...ah...!”

I gaped, and the cape swirled, and then he—or she?—was gone.

“W-wait!”

I jumped up and ran after Boogiepop, but when I made it to the corner, he was long gone.

“Argh...what the hell...!”

I felt a wave of panic pass over me.

I was a big fan of the stories about Boogiepop. I'd often thought that if he really existed, I'd love to meet him.

I started asking people around me, but no one else had noticed Boogiepop.

“Um, excuse me?” I said, tapping yet another person on the shoulder.

9:58 A.M.

Hunh? Oh...”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. When I turned around, I saw the girl I’d laughed at standing there, looking desperate. Apparently she didn’t even realize it was me.

“Um, did you see someone in a black hat go this way?” she asked.

“N-no. Shiro, did you?”

Shiro looked confused. “I didn’t, but...a black hat? Like...” he muttered.

But the second he said he didn’t, the girl was gone, pushing her way through the crowd.

“What the heck?” I said, baffled.

“.....”

Shiro was lost in thought. “No, it couldn’t be... but...”

He seemed like he had an idea, so I asked, but he just shook his head.

“Oh, no...never mind.”

Given his reasons for being here, I didn’t feel comfortable digging further, so I just let it drop.

The Erik Satie playing over the speakers cut off, replaced abruptly with a much more upbeat number.

Dahhdadadan, dan da-dan! Funky rock with a catchy beat to it. I’d heard it before. This was Led Zeppelin’s “Custard Pie”. Wasn’t it mostly lifted from earlier songs, yet presented as original work? Half-plagiarized? Kind of a hacky song.

“Totally wrong for this place...!” I said, shaking my head at the music programmer’s taste.

The crowd around us paused, expecting some sort of announcement to follow the sudden change in music. A silence fell. I heard a mother nearby saying, “Makoto-kun, shush.”

And—an instant later, every single source of light in the building cut out, plunging us into darkness.

10:00 A.M.

I, Niitoki Kei, was walking through an area with a really low ceiling, maybe 180 centimeters high. But since I was 140 centimeters tall, this didn't exactly pose a problem. There were all sorts of bizarre things lined up around me.

Mannequins, maybe? Life-sized human sculptures, standing in lines. What made them so bizarre was that bits of them—their arms or torsos, necks and legs—were twisted and melted like a plastic doll placed in a fire. The worst of them had their faces distorted. Looking at them made my head spin.

There were no lights, but I'd found a flashlight and was using that to light my way.

When I'd first opened that door and stepped inside—it was open, though maybe only because Boogiepop had broken the lock—these things had startled me. But once I realized they were mannequins, I settled down a little.

Inspecting them more closely, each of them was labeled “Teratsuki Model AD-23”, so these must've been from the rich guy's own collection. Or perhaps it was stuff he made himself in his free time.

C-creepy hobby...

I had a bad habit of trying to sort out anything I found unclear and this plastic battalion was making that part of me itch like crazy. I couldn't imagine what whoever made these and lined them up here could possibly have been thinking. Really unpleasant. I didn't care how important Teratsuki was; I wanted to grab him and yell, “What's your problem?!” Except I couldn't, because he was dead.

I was clearly in the building's basement, or maybe some sort of attic? It wound all around and I could hear voices both above and below me.

Boogiepop may have found a way to get out where those people are...

I was starting to deflate.

In hindsight, I started to wonder what I was doing following

Boogiepop in here. If the world really was in danger, what was I going to do about it? Did I think trying to help out would somehow pay him back for last time?

...I totally did.

But I was not at all sure I could actually help.

“Hmm...”

I heard a clang behind me, as if something had fallen over.

I heard a stir run through the crowds above and below me.

“Mm?”

It wasn’t a happy sound. That was fear.

What happened? Come to think of it, the music I was hearing had suddenly changed.

I listened closer.

Dahhdadadan, dan da-dan...

Seemed pretty cheerful. A friend of mine was really into Western music and she’d played this for me once. This was “Custard Pie.”

But why this song? Before I found an answer, I noticed something weird.

“Why can I hear the song so clearly?”

No sooner had I noticed this than the volume grew even louder, until my ears were ringing.

“Wh-what the...?”

It was still getting louder.

Unable to bear it, I clapped my hands over my ears.

But even with my ears covered, the sound stayed just as loud.

“What the hell...?!” I yelled, crouching down.

As I did, a voice on the song whispered in my ear...

“Niitoki-senpai, what are you hiding...?”

I jumped.

I recognized that voice.

It belonged to that pretty man... no, he was still a boy.

“Are you going to keep hiding this forever?”

“Impossible!” I screamed. “Y-you’re dead!”

I opened my eyes, and gasped.

I was somewhere else.

This wasn’t anywhere in the eaves of that Moon-whatever building.

I was at my school, in the garden of Shinyo Academy.

“.....”

It was evening, a few minutes before nightfall, and I was standing there alone.

I looked at my feet.

Just like that day, there was a puddle of blood on the ground.

“I see... this is where you came,” that voice said, behind me.

I spun around.

“You left something hidden here, at that time.”

The speaker nodded. Tall. Handsome. But if you looked carefully, he was hard to get a read on. A boy a year younger than me...

“S-Saotome-kun...”

No matter how you looked at him, he was my kouhai on the discipline committee, Saotome Masami.

But...he’d... that day, I was sure he’d...

“You’re right. I am not Saotome Masami,” he nodded.

“Th-then...what...?” my voice shook.

He smiled and quietly gave his name. “I am the King of Distortion, ruler of the distortion in the hearts of man. I am everywhere, and I am nowhere.”

But his appearance, voice, even his manner was clearly that of Saotome Masami’s.

No... looking closer, there was one thing off. His eyes. There was no light in his eyes at all. Just a flat surface, like cloudy glass.

It reminded me of an insect's compound eyes.

"Th-the King of Distortion?"

"I have taken Saotome Masami's form because you desired it," the King of Distortion said. "He remains in your heart, and the only way to resolve that is for you to meet him again."

"Wh-what do you mean...?" I said, confused.

But this thing shaped like Saotome Masami just laughed.

"You already know what I mean," he said.

I'd met someone who spoke entirely in strange declarations before.

It's because of people like you that the world manages to remain a halfway decent place.

Yeah...

The way the King of Distortion spoke was just like Boogiepop.

"....."

When I just stared at him, he said, "Shall we walk a bit?"

He began moving across the twilight garden.

"....."

I hesitated, but in the end, I went with him.

The gravel under my feet felt so real, it was hard to believe this was all an illusion. I wasn't even sure it was. Perhaps I'd actually traveled through space and time, back to that place, on that day...

But Kirima Nagi was here, too...and Tanaka-kun...and...

Hesitantly, I asked him, "Wh-what happened to your... your lover?"

"Mm?"

"Th-the Manticore? She was... she was with you."

"Hmm. Is that what you desire, President?"

That struck me right in the heart.

After everything went down, I'd done my best to put the pieces together...and failed.

What had Saotome Masami and the Manticore been doing? I couldn't begin to imagine. I didn't even want to.

I felt... part of me knew I'd be jealous of them and that scared me.

What was it like to have a world for just the two of them, even if it made enemies of everyone else? I couldn't begin to guess.

"If you desired it, I would have appeared as both of them. But *she* would only be in your way."

"B-but I..."

I felt like this conversation was taking a very unpleasant turn.

The King of Distortion said nothing more, just walked us all the way to the gates of the school, took his ID card out of his pocket and used it to open the gates. (Our school gate required you to run your ID card through them, like the ticket gates at the train station.)

He went out.

I hastily did the same and went after him.

The sky was red, with a brisk fall wind blowing, scattering the maple leaves. The boy and I went down the hill.

It was like—like we were a couple.

"I was never..." I muttered. "I never once thought of Saotome-kun that way."

Yes. It was Takeda-senpai I liked, not this guy.

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not here for wish fulfillment," the King of Distortion said, smiling at me. "But he remains lodged in your heart. I'm just giving you a chance to do something about it."

"What does that even mean?! What are you trying to achieve by showing me this dream?"

"I'm not trying to do anything. It's you who are trying to achieve something, President."

"Stop calling me that!" I snapped. "It's not like I like being president of the discipline committee."

"But somebody has to do it?" he laughed. "And doing it earns you some brownie points for your college applications, right?"

"I-I'm not doing it for that!"

"Everyone thinks you are. Niitoki Kei's such a brown-noser. A goody two-shoes. A teacher's pet."

He sneered.

Having him say this with Saotome Masami's face made me even angrier.

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

"Then who do you want? If Takeda Keiji said it, what would you think?"

I gasped.

"What if that's the reason Takeda Keiji didn't react at all when you told him you love him?"

"S-senpai wouldn't...!"

"But he broke your heart. Why are you defending him?"

"Erp..."

I felt dizzy and knelt down, putting my hands on the ground. My hand touched something hard.

Surprised, I looked down, and found the weapon Kirima Nagi had dropped that day. A stun gun capable of delivering millions of volts.

"...!"

Before I had a chance to wonder why it was here, I was holding it like I had that day.

"Yes...now you have a weapon once more. What will you do with it this time?" the King of Distortion said. The stun gun in my hand turned into a real gun. "Your anger gives you power. See? It's changing again."

The gun turned into a kind of submachine gun I'd only ever seen in movies. Then it became a shotgun with a three-centimeter barrel, the kind of gun that could blow people apart.

"...!"

I realized I was telling myself this was just an illusion, making excuses. This was a dream, so it didn't matter what I did.

I pointed the weapon at Saotome Masami, at the King of Distortion.

But...

"Argh..."

But my hands wouldn't do anything. I couldn't even put my finger on the trigger.

"Argh...wh-why?"

I didn't get it. Wasn't I angry?

"What's going on?"

Why did it hurt this much?

"I see... this isn't anger. Not at all," the King of Distortion said. "So what is it? What feelings did Saotome Masami leave you with?"

"Rrrraghh...?!"

I was shaking like a leaf.

I felt like I was teetering on the edge of a cliff.

If I took one more step, I'd go tumbling over.

"Now...what is it you're thinking?" the King of Distortion whispered in my ear.

"I... I... I'm..." I stammered.

Then a hand grabbed my arm from behind.

"That's enough," a voice said. I spun around.

Standing there, just like that day, just when I thought I was a goner... a silhouette in a black hat.

"B-Boogiepop..." I said.

"Oh...I thought you'd come," the King of Distortion said, as if greeting an old friend.

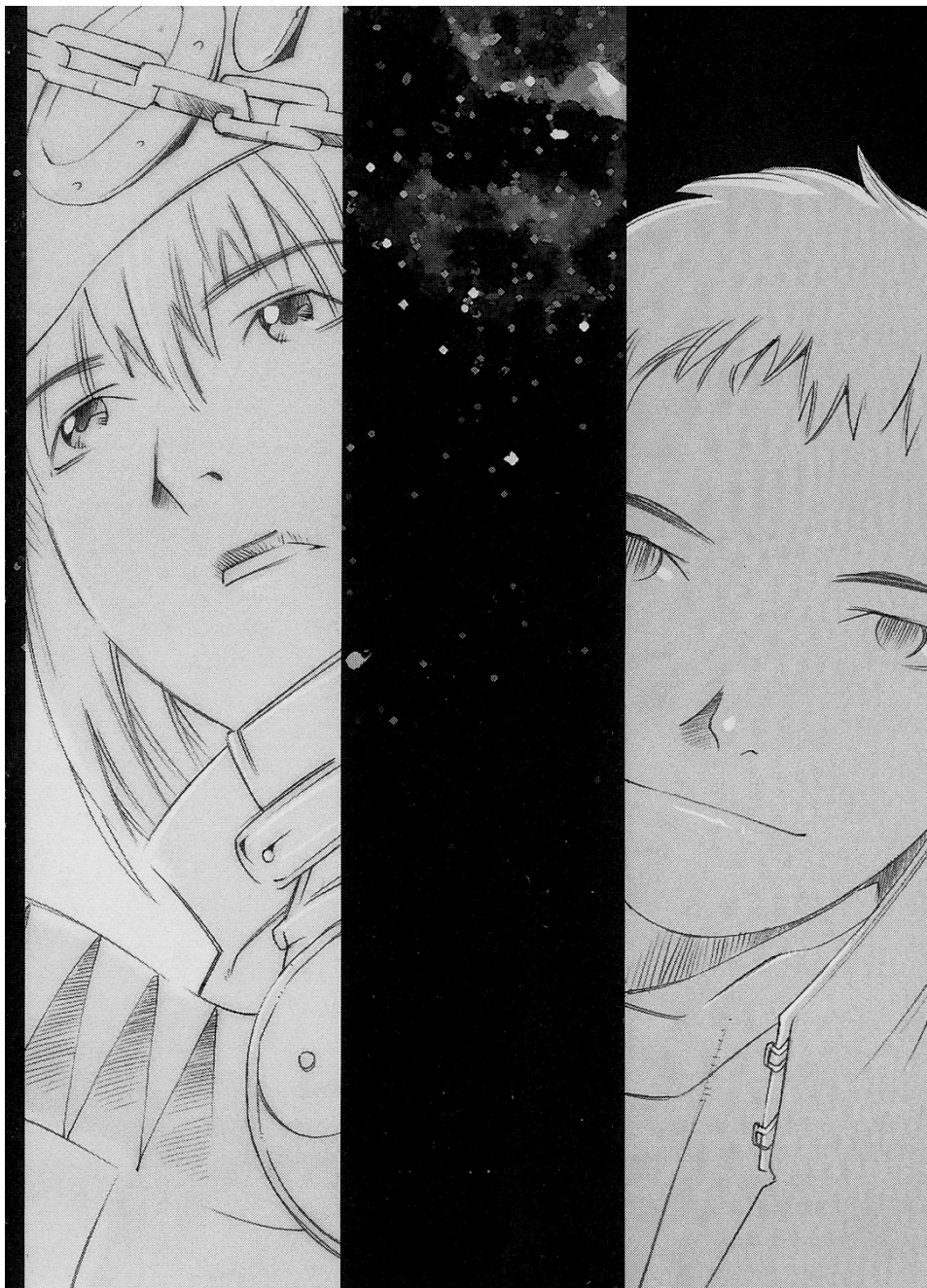
The figure in black frowned. "You know me?" he asked.

"But I won't allow you to get in my way. I will not allow anyone to stop my experiment, not until I've turned everything to gold."

"Tell me your name."

"I am the King of Distortion."





As the boy with Saotome's face but no light in his eyes spoke, I found myself back in the darkened eaves of the Moon Temple.

“...!”

I looked around and found the flashlight lying on the ground, lighting up the rows of twisted mannequins. I was back.

And not just me—Boogiepop was right beside me, still holding my arm.

“Oh...” I said, at a loss for words.

“You again, Niitoki Kei?” he said.

“Er, um...”

Not sure what to say, I settled for silence.

Boogiepop ignored my confusion, and shook his head.

“He called himself the King of Distortion. This won't be simple. I may not be able to keep you safe this time,” he muttered.

10:25 A.M.

Panic was spreading outside the Moon Temple.

At exactly ten, emergency shutters had slammed down over not just the main doors but every employee entrance as well. And these were heavy-duty security shutters. Fortunately, nobody got trapped under them or injured when they came down, but the staff inside and the hundred or so customers who'd been let in were cut off from the outside world.

"What happened?"

"Some sort of error in the security system?"

Nearly half an hour later, contact had easily been established with those inside by using the intercom system and by calling the guests who had cell phones. While they certainly couldn't get out, no other major problems had occurred. Authorities were asking the visitors to gather on the lower levels, just in case.

However, the power was out. It seemed the computer had thought it was being hacked, and unexpectedly decided to activate emergency measures. But it seemed unlikely there was any industrial espionage going on, since none of the systems in the Moon Temple had any data worth going after.

"Unless they're just doing this for the thrill of it?"

"What kind of asshole would do that?"

The building was scheduled for demolition anyway, so they considered busting through the shutters, but given the cost of refunding the entrance tickets and leasing fees on the equipment needed for that, the staff and the police were leaning towards waiting for the security system to sort itself out. This event was so poorly structured that even in an emergency like this, it wasn't clear who had the authority to make that call.

The rain was getting stronger and the wind was picking up.

10:32 A.M.

He had no idea what was going on. What was this?

Shinozaki Yuzuru was a college student who'd been hired to help guide the event visitors, and had been completely at a loss ever since "Custard Pie" had started blaring and the building had plunged into darkness.

He wasn't even standing in the same place. He was sitting in a café with the girl he'd been in love with three years ago, in high school.

"Wh-what the heck?!"

He stood up, surprised.

"Now, now, calm down," she said, just like she had that day. Hazuki Noriko, the girl he'd had a one-sided crush on.

But something about her seemed off.

Noriko had no light in her eyes. They looked like frosted glass or the faint luster of an insect's compound eyes.

"Wh-what? What did I do?"

"Have you done anything the last three years? Anything worth mentioning?"

This thing with Noriko's face laughed at him.

"Hunh...?"

"I am the King of Distortion. I am here to remind you of what remains in your heart."

"Distortion?"

The cell phone in Yuzuru's pocket rang. The one he'd been given to receive instructions on the job.

This thing reached across the table, and took the phone from him.

"Yes, Shinozaki speaking," the thing said, in Yuzuru's voice. With Noriko's face. "Oh, no. Nothing major going down. Yeah. Visitors are calm. Boss said lead them downstairs, so I'm doing just that. Yeah. Yeah. I'll let you know if anything happens. Thanks!"

And it hung up.

Yuzuru just stared in horror.

“.....”

While he reeled, the thing took an elegant sip of coffee.

“So what were we talking about, Shinozaki-kun?” Noriko’s voice said, just as she had that day.

Her eyes now looked like a regular human’s. Or maybe Yuzuru had just adjusted to it and could no longer tell the difference.

“Er, um...”

“You invited me here to tell me something, didn’t you? Or did we just happen to find ourselves walking back from cram school together?”

“.....”

That’s right.

Yuzuru had been waiting ages for a chance to talk to Noriko alone. She had lots of friends and nearly always moved in groups of three. But that day, her friends had been taking a mock test somewhere else and he finally got his chance.

But he ended up being unable to say anything worthwhile. The time flew by with pointless small talk. She’d gone to a junior college and he’d heard she got herself a boyfriend at the very first mixer she attended.

If only he’d asked her out that day. Or...

“N-no, I...”

“This time,” she smiled. “I’ll wait as long as it takes. Until you work up the nerve to say it.”

It was impossible for him to see this thing as anything but the real Hazuki Noriko.

They sat in the quiet café, staring at each other in silence.

Time passed, minute by minute, as if it would never end.

“Um...” he said.

And then the silence resumed.

10:46 A.M.

This had been going on almost an hour.

“So you’re the classic sheltered heiress, then?” Teratsuki Kyoichiro said, just as he had that day. Except for the curious lack of light in his eyes.

They were in the sky lounge on the twentieth floor of a hotel, and except for the bartender, they were alone. A beautiful night view spread out before them.

“Ugh, don’t remind me. He’s just a manager at a minor firm, not exactly raking it in, but my father insists on treating me like that. Less like a daughter than an expensive French doll. My mother...”

She trailed off.

He turned towards her.

“This is so strange, King of Distortion. That was your name, right?”

“Call me whatever you like.” He smiled, gently.

“Yes...well, my mother... truth is, she hates my father, and she hates me.”

She finally said the words she’d been unable to say that day.

Hashizaka Shizuka had her child when she was only twenty.

She honestly had no idea whose child it was. But there was only one man, out of all the men she’d been with, whose child she wanted it to be.

Teratsuki Kyoichiro. He’d been forty-seven at the time.

She and Teratsuki had been together three times. He had the face and body of a man in his thirties and must have had all kinds of girls after him, so perhaps it was all just a game to him. He was rich, but

never married, never even dated any one woman for long. There were rumors he was keeping himself available for a strategic marriage. The dozens—no, hundreds of women he'd slept with made it clear he wasn't batting for the other side. He was just playing the field, but for some reason, it never once resulted in the sort of lawsuit that level of philandering usually does.

When Shizuka told him she was pregnant, she learned the reason why.

When he heard that, Teratsuki burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I see! So how much do you want?"

"Th-that's not what..." Shizuka protested, but Teratsuki wasn't having it.

And what he said next really threw her.

"I'll give you whatever you ask for. But I won't admit parentage or marry you. You see, I don't have citizenship. There's no way we could ever get the office to accept those documents."

"Hunh...?"

"I don't know whose child it is, but...that doesn't matter."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I'm unable to have children. Sorry."

"...!"

Shizuka had no idea what to say in response to this. But she wasn't done yet.

"I-I'll leak it to the press! The scandal will destroy your company!"

There was no backing down from that statement. Even if she succeeded, there was no way he would ever love her.

But Teratsuki just sighed.

"Friendly warning? Don't do that. You'd be putting your life at risk."

He sounded serious. Like this hurt him.

"E-empty threats won't..."

"I wish it was only a threat. Look, why don't you try sending that story to a weekly rag under a false name? Make sure you use a false

name. Using your real name is too dangerous.”

His tone was so grave that Shizuka shivered.

“Wh-what’ll happen?”

“First, within two months that monthly magazine will go under. Same with any newspaper,” Teratsuki said, holding her gaze. “I’m not talking about putting pressure on them. And I won’t be the one doing this. The system I work for will.”

“.....”

Shizuka gaped at him. Something in his eyes told her he wasn’t lying.

“Y-you don’t have citizenship?”

The true meaning of those words finally sank in. Was it even possible for a powerful industry tycoon like him to have no citizenship? Yet, it seemed like it hadn’t caused him any problems. Which meant...

“Exactly,” Teratsuki said. “I’m talking about a power above nations.”

Shizuka moved her lips, but no words came out.

“So, back to the subject of money,” Teratsuki said. “I won’t have you insisting you’ll take nothing. You’ve got your chance; go ahead and squeeze me. It’ll be much easier raising the child if you’ve got money. Mm?”

“.....”

Shizuka quietly realized that not one word Teratsuki had said was remotely normal for a moment like this.

“You...won’t tell me not to have it?”

“Do you want me to?” Teratsuki frowned. “If you want to, I won’t stop you, but personally...I feel like that would be a waste.”

“W-with no clear father, I...”

“Then just get married. I’m sure you have no shortage of potential partners. And I promise...even if you get married, I won’t balk at paying.”

He made it sound so easy.

“.....”

“This is your chance. In a few years... maybe six? I’ll be disposed of,” he said, as if this revelation was of no consequence. “Once that happens, there’ll be no more money.”

“.....”

“I’m not going to take that lying down. I plan to leave one last gift behind. I’d like to do what I can for you before that mess happens.”

“.....”

In the end, there was nothing she could do but take the money he offered and give birth to Makoto. She did not marry. After Teratsuki, there were no men she was willing to be with and she couldn’t trust any man who’d marry her for the money. She fought with her parents, but in the end the money settled that, too.

Once she had the child she became a devoted mother, despite her promiscuous past. She now had the money to play around as much as she wanted—at least, to the extent that she had before—without relying on her parents, but that just made her not interested in it at all. She could easily have relied on babysitters, but she never really did, dedicating herself to raising Makoto on her own.

It was her own way of getting revenge on Teratsuki.

She would make Makoto into a great man and then show him to Teratsuki—make him regret not claiming him as his own. That was what Shizuka lived for.

But...then he died. Slightly later than his initial prediction of six years—but not quite eight.

Shizuka couldn’t believe it.

“Custard Pie.”

She knew that song.

Teratsuki Kyoichiro had been a Led Zeppelin fan. When she’d been escorted to the hotel suite he used as a bedroom, this song had been playing on the stereo, the opening to their second album, *Physical Graffiti*. Shizuka clearly remembered laughing to herself at how childish his taste was. A man as wealthy as him, listening to rock?

So when she heard that song playing, Shizuka knew she'd been right.

This Moon Temple...

It was the gift Teratsuki Kyoichiro left behind.

"Mom!" Makoto tugged at her skirt. But she wasn't paying any attention to her son. How could she?

She had been thrown into another world.

"Now, now, is that any way to talk about your mother?" the King of Distortion said, with Teratsuki's face. His tone and grin showed he agreed with her.

Shizuka let out an inappropriately raucous laugh. She had quite a buzz going, or at least, felt like she did.

"I mean, she does!"

At the time, she'd played it off, trying to sound wise. "She has her own problems," she'd said. But there was no reason to hide it now.

"My mother despises me. Nothing I did would make her like me. She never once came to parents' day at school—she was something of a beauty when she was young, and that made her just conceited enough to let happiness slip through her grasp several times before realizing she was thirty-five, and hastily settling for my father. And I was the result. And she took all her frustration out on me. Once I started raising my own child, I was so surprised—I kept doing things, and then remembering that my own mother never did that for me."

"I see." The King of Distortion nodded. "But you're doing right by your own child. That's good."

Shizuka giggled, bending over.

"What are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just...this is all your doing, isn't it? Kyoichiro-san." She looked blearily up at him. "You arranged for all of this to happen, and yet...and yet you're just being nice."

She gave another wild laugh. But the King of Distortion didn't look at all put off.

"I'm not so sure. Did I ever claim to be the real Teratsuki Kyoichiro?"

"Who else could you be?"

"But this is the world as you desired it to be. What my real nature is has nothing to do with you."

"So Teratsuki Kyoichiro never really cared about me, did he? Just like my mother..."

Shizuka was starting to slur her speech.

"But I loved you. I really did, Kyoichiro-san. I really loved you. I just couldn't tell you."

"Is that true? Or were you not that serious at the time, and only convinced yourself you were in hindsight?" the King of Distortion asked.

"Does it even matter? I don't even care anymore..."

Shizuka flopped down on the counter.

"I just want to be done with it all... I've been such an idiot..." she muttered. Then she suddenly jumped to her feet. "Hold on... am I really back in time?"

She glared at the King of Distortion.

"Then where's Makoto? What happened to him? Is he not born yet? Is he not going to be born?"

The King of Distortion shrugged Teratsuki Kyoichiro's shoulders, smiling. "Good question. Maybe. Or...maybe we can make him what you've always wanted."

"What I..."

Shizuka swallowed.

"You mean? You can't..."

The King of Distortion did not reply.

He just smiled.

"You mean... I could make it so Makoto was actually your son?"

She choked on the words, her face turning pale.

"Good question," the King of Distortion said, smiling.

11:02 A.M.

I felt like a lot of time had passed since I started searching the Moon Temple for Boogiepop. I was beginning to think I'd never find him.

I let out an exhausted sigh.

"Sakiko, you always give up so easily!"

I could swear I heard Hinako's voice in my ear. She was a friend of mine from elementary school.

"Whatever. I'm not smart like you, Hina-chan," I muttered under my breath.

But how much time had actually passed? Since that loud song started looping, I'd completely lost track of time.

And there was no one around now. There'd been a huge crowd filling the Moon Temple, so when had I ended up alone? I couldn't remember.

And since when was this building made of glass?

I felt like it didn't use to have windows, but was that just my imagination? The mid-summer sun was shining brightly through the glass walls and ceiling.

There were huge puffy clouds above and the shrill cries of cicadas all around.

Would Boogiepop ever show up here? Had I just been seeing things?

I wasn't even sure where I'd seen him now.

"Hunh?"

Something felt wrong. That impression suddenly drifted across my mind.

"What?" Hinako asked.

A wave of hot air washed over me. It was so damn humid.

"Was I here?"

I felt like I had been in another building a minute ago.

“Hunh? What does *that* mean?”

“Um, well...is it even summer?”

“Obviously.”

“Valentine’s Day isn’t in summer, is it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Hunh...never mind. Just a feeling.”

It was summer vacation.

And I was back in the boonies, hanging out with Hinako again. We were on a picnic. Clearly.

“You’re always like this, Sakiko,” Hinako chuckled. Back in elementary school, her gentle smile had always helped me relax.

“You haven’t changed either, Hina-chan. If anything, you’re even prettier.”

I’d last seen Hinako when she was eleven and just a willowy little kid. She hadn’t even had her period yet. I’d admired how strong willed she was, how forthright she was.

And here she was again.

She’d grown up. Slim, but with a soft curve to her. Very feminine, but in a way that inspired admiration instead of jealousy. I’d always known she was going to be a great beauty.

“Yeah? Thanks,” she said, embarrassed. “You’re beautiful, too, Sakiko. I bet the boys love you.”

“Whatever. None of the boys after me are worth my time.” I sighed. “I’m with Takeshi today, and it’s totally not working.”

Wait, I thought. Who was Takeshi, again? From today? When was that?

“Hunh,” Hinako didn’t seem to think this was strange at all. “But he’s trying so hard to make this fun for you.”

“Fat lot of good it’s doing,” I said. The words came even as my mind reeled.

We were standing in the summer sun, facing each other.

Despite the strong light coming from above, there was an odd lack

of light in Hinako's eyes.

"You're trying to talk yourself into that, aren't you? You actually kinda like him, right?"

"I do not!" I shook my head.

For some reason I couldn't bear hearing Hinako talk like this.

Hinako would never date a boy...

"Hunh...?"

I was surprised to find tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Hina-chan, um... when... when was that?"

When had that happened?

"When was what?" Hinako smiled.

"You know! Just after summer vacation, when I said something mean and you..."

...no boys will ever like a girl as scrawny as you. You might as well just die...

"And I wanted to apologize so much but..."

I looked up.

Hinako was still smiling.

She said, "But before you could, I died?"

I nodded.

"I made up my mind to apologize after summer vacation, when we saw each other at school, but Hina-chan..."

"Her whole family died in a car accident. What a nightmare."

"I was just jealous of her, really. I had a crush on Kano-kun, but there were rumors he liked Hina-chan, so... so I was mean to her."

"She might not have been that upset about it."

"But I needed to say something!" I cried. "I had to say, 'I'm sorry.' Hina-chan, I think you'll be really gorgeous when you grow up. I know you will. So... so I'm sorry."

Hinako smiled.

Hinako, all grown up.

No... not her.

That's right. When this started, the thing told me who it was. I'd just forgotten, somehow.

The King of Distortion.

That's what the being in front of me was called.

"It bothered you that much?" The thing with grown-up Hinako's face had a gentle voice.

"Yeah, it did. I'm an awful, awful person. I have no right to be alive. So...that's why..." my voice shook. "That's why I want Boogiepop to kill me!"

That's why I'd chased him.

So the legendary shinigami would kill me.

"Boogiepop, hmm?"

"He's here!"

I wasn't sure where "here" was, but I yelled it anyway.

"I'm sure I saw him! I don't know why he's here, but he is!"

"Yes, I know," the King of Distortion nodded. "But would Boogiepop really kill you? Would he save you from your suffering?"

The King of Distortion sounded like it was enjoying itself.

"Can you rely on him? You expect things from him because of rumors, because he's famous... but is that all?"

"...!"

I could feel myself calming down.

There were cicadas crying all around us. The air was sticky, heavy.

The King of Distortion stood in this heat, not sweating at all.

Watching over me.

"Th-then would... would you kill me? Hina-chan?"

I knew it wasn't her, but I called her by that name anyway.

"You are suffering," The King of Distortion said. The sound of the cicadas in the distance had changed, matching the song, that rhythm echoing through my stomach. I could hear it. "The suffering is so great

you've driven it out of your mind, but it never went away."

The voice was soft and clear, like a bell rung by an angel come down from heaven.

"There's no way to erase your suffering. That suffering is the core of your heart now. That's why—that's why your wish to ease the suffering in your heart must be turned into gold."

"Gold?"

"Yes. All that shines."

11:34 A.M.

Back then, I, Habara Kentaro, was a huge idiot.

I was having a blast hacking industry data and selling it on the black market, heedless of the danger. School was beyond boring—it was actively painful—and I was so filled with scorn for the lower- or mid-tier firms' security, so cheap even a teenager could break through it, that I never once felt guilty about stealing from them. I wasn't after these firms' data, I was after data from a bigger firm they worked under, but the larger company's security was way better than the little guys'. I didn't know what they were thinking, but the big shots all had their heads in the clouds and never bothered to look at the ground they were standing on.

“Heh heh heh...all mine.”

That day I'd blown off classic lit and was sitting in a café, using a black-market burner phone's mobile service to hack into an industry data bank. This was a brand-new company, some sort of venture deal, but the investors were all foreign, and I was getting a sense there was something shady backing them.

And their security was shit.

I reached the main bank entrance easily.

“Heh, it's your own fault,” I said, and pushed through that gate. Suddenly my screen started flashing.

WARNING: INSTRUMENTALITY OF MANKIND

The text appeared on my screen.

Then my device froze and refused to boot back up.

Wh-what the...?!

I panicked.

A moment later, the phone started blasting a really loud alarm.

Echoing through the shop.

Sh-shit, a virus! I'm infected!

It was a trap. I hastily pulled the cord connecting the phone to my device, and then removed the battery.

But it still didn't stop.

It must be running on residual power.

"Tch, what the heck? Did it break?" I said, an awkward performance for the other customers glaring at me. I removed the speakers from the computer and at last the sound stopped.

"Sir, I beg your pardon, but..." the waitress said, frowning.

"Yeah, sorry. It's over now!" I said, bowing my head. That weird text screen was still flashing on the phone's screen, so I snapped it shut.

I asked for my check, and left, ditching the phone where it wouldn't be found.

"Jeez, that was bad..."

My computer was assembled by hand from bits bought at the parts shop, so even if they managed to grab some info about it, they'd never trace it to me.

I relaxed. Rather than learn from this, I was totally ready to keep on going.

But the mess I'd found myself in was far worse than I thought.

I hit the town, hoping to grab a replacement phone from a fence. They usually hung around these parts.

But for some reason I couldn't find a single one.

Weird...?

Instead, there were a lot of dudes with scary looks in their eyes roaming around. They all looked the same, so at first I thought they were yakuza.

But they weren't. One of them spoke to me.

"You come down here often?" he said.

"Er, yeah... I'm a student."

"High school? Can I see your student ID?"

When I blinked at him, he showed me a black badge. He was a

cop.

“S-sure, it’s right here. What’s going on?” I asked, handing him my ID. I didn’t need to ask. I knew what. They were looking for me. A lot of them. All of them pulling in OT, all to catch an idiot like me when I rolled up.

“Oh? Pretty good school.”

The plainclothes detective gave me a look. He wasn’t one to miss a thing.

I just gave a vague nod. “Um...what are you asking?”

“Meaning?”

“Is this going to go like, in your report? I’d rather not get mixed up in any police business.” I was doing my damndest to act like some snobby prep school kid.

The cop laughed. “Maybe it will, maybe it won’t. Just you watch yourself.”

What an asshole. But while his tone reeked of scorn and contempt, he didn’t seem like he suspected me.

He poked at me for another five minutes before giving me my ID back and letting me go.

Exhausted, I went into a nearby café, sighing.

What the hell. They grabbed up everyone fencing stolen phones already? What the hell kind of hornet’s nest did I step in?

I’d barely made it out in time. If I’d let that alarm ring longer, if I hadn’t ditched the phone instantly, they’d have caught me. If I’d been dumb enough to use it again...

Desperately trying to get my hands to stop shaking, I took a sip of coffee.

As I did, a high school girl came into the café.

She was gorgeous, but that was not where my mind was. I soon looked away.

But she came right over to me.

“Habara Kentaro?” she said. She talked like a man.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She didn't answer, just sat down opposite me. Like we'd agreed to meet here.

"Uh..."

"They're here for you, right?" she said.

"Wh-what?" I protested.

She ignored me.

"Time for you to quit that 'job'," she said. "You got away with it so far since you weren't hurting anyone that mattered, but that's over. I dunno what you hooked, but the world ain't as forgiving as you seem to think. That alarm spooked you, right?"

She spoke in a normal tone of voice, with a smile.

"At least you took out a network of fences with you."

There was a strange power to her smile, somehow both intimidating and reassuring. It didn't seem like a smile someone who looked like her should have, but I couldn't imagine her with any other kind.



“Um...what do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“No, wait... What are you after?”

Had *she* been letting me get away with this?

Had *she* set it so that alarm would go off if someone started hacking me back?

So that my fuckup would get the guys around here picked up?

“Think what you like,” she said, and turned to the waiter.

“Darjeeling Tea.”

She turned back to me.

“I’ll pick up the check. Consider it my way of saying thanks.”

She smiled.

I gaped at her for a moment, but then it all came flooding out and I blurted, “Oh...! That explains it. I thought it was all too easy! I’ve just been dancing on the palm of your hand!”

And she’d saved my ass. I sighed, and she took a sip of her tea, nodding.

“Well. Learn your lesson, and don’t do anything stupid again.”

“I should be pissed. You were just using me!” I said, suddenly angry.

“I’m not sorry,” she said. “Frankly, you deserved it.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I shook my head. “I mean, if you’d talked to me earlier, I could have helped do a lot more.”

She frowned at me.

“What do you mean?”

“I was hacking and stealing or whatever for... for no good reason. I was just bored, really. So... so if I’d known about you, I’d have been only too happy to help. Why didn’t you say anything?”

I glared at her, genuinely furious.

I was already in love with her.

“.....”

She just stared back at me, at a loss for words.

“Right, Kirima Nagi-san? Of Shinyo Academy?”

She frowned.

“How do you know that?”

I laughed.

“How is that a surprise? Girl as hot as you, I’m hardly the only guy who figured out your name.”

“.....”

She made a face.

And that’s how I got to know Kirima Nagi.

But right now, in front of me, that same day was playing out again.

“So you mean you’ve got a crush on me?” the thing with Nagi’s face said, grinning. But the way it smiled was nothing like the girl I loved.

“That’s true, but there was no way I could admit that to her then.”

I sighed.

“Why? Why wouldn’t you tell her?”

That smile grew even broader. It was irritating the hell outta me.

“How the hell could I? She’s a goddamn superhero! She’s not gonna drop that to date me.”

Lately I’d been trying to help her, but she just said she didn’t want friends getting mixed up in it and sent me packing. I did what I could anyway, but I don’t think it was much help. It’s like I wasn’t really there at all.

“How noble of you.”

Man, it sounded just like her.

I clicked my tongue, and glanced round the café interior.

The slick interior was all wood, the tabletop lightly varnished, reflecting about half the usual light. The lamps hanging over each table were neither too bright nor too dim, and very calming.

Even the scent on the air was just like the real place.

But...

"No matter how I look at it, this has to be an illusion," I said, scowling. "I'm certain my body is still in the Moon Temple. I dunno what's going on with it..."

"You think so?" The King of Distortion raised Nagi's eyebrow, amused.

"I dunno what you're up to, but I'm not about to stay trapped here. I'll find a way out."

I fixed the King of Distortion with my best glare.

"You're very brave, Kentaro."

"At least when you're watching," I said, laughing. "I dunno why you took her form, but I can't show any weakness when I'm around her. Tough luck, there."

I looked Nagi's face right in the eye.

"There's nothing here that I didn't see personally. So this is all happening inside my own head. It's a dream of some kind. That's weird as hell, but you're obviously pulling everything from my memories."

"I see. Makes sense." Nagi smiling at me like that sure gave me a confidence boost, despite myself. If only the real one would recognize my efforts like this... but that was a dangerous temptation.

Don't fall for it!

I drove such thoughts out of my mind.

"What are you plotting?"

"....."

The King of Distortion avoided my gaze.

But that smile was still on its lips.

"You called this a dream," it said, laughing softly. "Perhaps it is. But consider this, Kentaro."

"...? Consider what?"

"The life you've led until now was all a nightmare."

"What's your point?"

"What's the simplest way to escape a nightmare, Kentaro?"

"I don't follow."

“It’s very simple. Easiest thing in the world.”

The King of Distortion looked me right in the eye. And then...

Dahhdadadan, dan da-dan...

I thought I heard that song playing somewhere again and then a tremor shook the café.

The glass in the windows rattled.

An earthquake? I thought, forgetting this was only an illusion. But it didn’t feel like an earthquake.

More tremors came, but the gap between them was too regular. These were paced at the exact same rhythm as a human heartbeat.

My coffee cup fell over, and the liquid inside spread across the tabletop. The lamps were bouncing around and cords were falling off hooks around the café. I could hear the crash of dishes shattering.

“Wh-what the...?”

“Couldn’t be simpler,” someone said.

I turned to look.

And froze.

It was no longer wearing Nagi’s form. It was a young male student I’d never seen before. But with that same lack of light in the eyes.

“Wh-who are you?”

“The King of Distortion. I told you this.”

“Th-that’s not what I mean... who is he?”

I’d never seen this boy before. How was he in my illusion?

“Him? Kirima Nagi knows who he is. His name is Saotome Masami. He’s like you.”

So it was wearing this Saotome’s face now?

“S-Saotome...?”

“Just like you, he had a one-sided crush on Kirima Nagi. Although he did actually ask her out. She said no.”

“.....”

I gaped at him.

I'd never even heard the name before. But if he'd showed up here, then that meant...

"So, the best way to free yourself from a nightmare..." The King of Distortion said. "Is to wake up. What else?"

"Hngg..."

I could feel fear rising up inside me, the one thing everyone fears the most. Namely...

Maybe I'm going insane.

If I was, then everything I'd done would fall apart, becoming nothing but an embarrassing, pathetic mistake.

"Unh...arghhh!" I yelled, stood up, and ran out of the café.

A moment later, that tremor hit me again—so hard I lost my balance and fell down. The roughness of the asphalt scraping against my palms felt undeniably real.

"Ow..."

I tried to stand up. Then a massive shadow loomed over me. So large it covered everything around me.

"N-no way..."

This felt wrong. I'd seen something like this before. But just because I remembered it didn't prove whether this was an illusion or not. Because I'd seen it in a movie.

A series of tremors. A shadow on the pavement. And then a roar from above...

"Rrrroooooaarr...!"

There it was.

"You're shitting me..."

I turned around.

And saw a monster.

No other word for it. That's what it was.

Fifty meters tall. Like an erupting volcano supported by six legs as large as expressway bridge supports, shaking the ground with every step. The impact made the nearby puddles thrash.

And as the monster stomped, it crushed buildings underfoot.

“.....”

I gaped at it. In a sense, this thing appearing proved that I was trapped in an illusion. But something had a grip on my emotions that I rarely experienced when dreaming. Namely...

No way. This isn't possible. I must be dreaming.

Who thinks like that when they *are* dreaming?

The monster shook its massive frame, and as if the unchecked energy raging inside it was overflowing, countless bolts of lightning shot out of it, destroying everything around. Nothing could stop such overwhelming destruction.

Devastation. This city belonged to the monster now.

I felt like its red eyes turned and fixed themselves on me.

I yelled and turned to run.

The town was deserted. Had everyone but me already fled? I ran through the empty streets. The mountainous beast behind me followed. With each step it took, windows around me shattered.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh...what the...”

What the hell was going on?!

Struggling to keep on my feet, I ran with all my might, turning a corner to try and get out of the monster's path.

I saw someone crouching ahead of me.

It was a kid, crying. His head was buried in his knees.

“Y-yo, kid! Watch out!” I yelled.

The kid jumped, and looked up.

I was surprised to see his eyes were human. This wasn't the King of Distortion.

He realized this, too.

“A...a grown-up?”

The monster was getting closer. He didn’t care about following the roads. He just stomped right through the buildings.

“R-run!” I said, grabbing the kid’s hand.

“Wh-who are...?”

“Habara Kentaro! And I’m not a grown-up, I’m in high school!”

The kid ignored me.

“You can see Zoragi, Mister?”

I’d never heard that title used to address me before.

“Just call me Kentaro, please. Mm?” I looked down at him.

“Zoragi? You mean the monster?”

I realized I’d seen this kid somewhere before.

Right, he’d been with his mom next to Shiro and me in line. I hadn’t paid him much attention, but I’d definitely seen him there.

“...!”

I remembered where I was now.

“Your name is Makoto, right?”

The kid gaped at me. “How do you know?”

Because I heard your Mom call you that, I thought. I didn’t bother answering.

“Right, that makes sense,” I said, grinning.

Of course. This was all coming from our memories. It was just that some of it came from barely remembered subconscious memories, things we didn’t know we knew. I’d probably brushed past that Saotome dude once before without realizing it. That explained him.

And Zoragi was probably something I’d seen on TV as a little kid.

“Wh-why did you stop?! Let’s run!” Makoto yelled.

“Oh...right.”

I started running again.

But not blindly, not anymore. I had a destination in mind.

What had the King of Destination said?

The best way to free yourself from a nightmare is to wake up.

He was right. I just had to wake myself up.

With Zoragi's shadow looming over us, I ran as fast as I could, back to where I'd started—back to the Moon Temple.

And it was standing exactly where it was in the real world.

"W-we're back? Is that good?" Makoto asked, anxious.

"Not a problem. Leave this to me!" I took Makoto through the unmanned entrance.

We ran up the giant staircase inside. Partway up, Makoto said, "Kentaro, I'm tired!"

He was breathing heavily and sat down on the stairs.

"Okay, you just wait there!" I left him there, racing toward my goal.

I was about halfway when something hit the Moon Temple, rocking the entire building.

Zoragi had caught up with us and was attacking the building. He knocked me down again.

His roar sounded like it was right outside the wall.

Was he after *me*?

Why would something that huge be chasing me down?

The pounding knocked me down a few more times as I ran, but at last I was there.

"I thought so!"

Just as I suspected, I found myself lying on the ground. Zoragi was trying to knock the entire building over, but here I was, fast asleep, just moaning a little.

Annoyed with myself, I put that frustration to work. "Wake up, moron!" I yelled and kicked myself as hard as I could.

“Wah!”

I jumped to my feet.

I’d kicked myself in the head and instinctively raised my arms to defend it, but there wasn’t so much as a lump. Although it did feel like it was ringing a bit.

“Um...am I...?”

It took me a moment to find myself. I felt like I was still running away from Zoragi... what was Zoragi again? I felt like I’d been in some deep shit. But I shook off my confusion pretty quickly. Right, I was in the Moon Temple.

It was dark. There were no windows and the power to the lights had been cut. But it wasn’t completely impossible to see. The green lamps of the emergency exit signs cast a faint glow. Even with the power out, the internal batteries would last a few hours.

Right...the circuits on those are too simple for anyone to do anything to them.

In the darkness around me, I could hear people groaning. I felt my way around. Everyone was in some sort of coma. Like I’d been a moment ago.

“What the hell is going on here?”

My eyes were getting used to it. I looked around.

“Unhhh...”

I heard a familiar voice nearby. I reached out and found him.

“Hey.”

“Unhh...I don’t know you...”

“Yo, Shiro, snap out of it! Wake up!”

I slapped Tanaka Shiro on the cheek.

His eyes fluttered open.

“Oh...”

“You remember me? Where we are? Talk to me.”

“H-Habara-san? Right...this is the Moon Temple.”

He shook his head. He was still with me, at least.

“What’s happening?”

“I dunno. Where’d you go?”

“I met ‘her’. And ‘he’ was there...”

This wasn’t illuminating.

“He?”

“The other one she was with,” he muttered. “I mean, honestly, I’m pretty sure he loved her more than I did. I think I tried to apologize...”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Probably something about that dead girl he’d come to the Moon Temple for, but it was all too vague.

“What about you, Habara-san? You were taken somewhere, too?”

“Hunh? W-well...”

I couldn’t give a straight answer myself.

I didn’t remember it all that clearly. I was sure I’d met Nagi and that she knew I was in love with her...but I couldn’t admit that to him.

“Yeah, I met...something called the King of Distortion.”

“Yeah, that thing... what is it?” Shiro said, nodding.

I folded my arms, thinking. “What’s he trying to accomplish here?”

“.....”

Shiro was lost in thought, but eventually what I’d said caught up with him.

“He? You mean, you know who the King of Distortion is?”

“There’s only one person it could be. Same dude who made this weird-ass building.”

“Then... Teratsuki Kyoichiro? But he’s dead...”

“That’s the problem. Maybe he only faked his death and is hiding in here somewhere. Or maybe he is dead and he arranged it so this would all happen anyway.”

I scowled.

“Either way, this is a hell of a situation. We’re all dancing on the palms of his hands.”

“.....”

12:00 P.M.

The King of Distortion.

Like Boogiepop, it had given itself that name.

It wasn't sure when it first noticed the distortion in the world. By the time it had taken form, the world had long since lost its shine, buried under layers of the useless and meaningless. At least, that's what it thought.

It couldn't see those useless things as useless, and couldn't see those meaningless things as entirely worthless, either. They were just distorted. Those distortions had turned what should be a road sloping upward into an endless Mobius strip.

To it, 'meaningless' things were like stairs. If you checked each step carefully and kept moving forward, you'd eventually break through to something beyond.

But it seemed to it that no one else could perceive this. No, it wasn't that they couldn't perceive it. It was that they were actively rejecting it. Turning their eyes from the shine their hearts produced, forcing themselves into a corner of suffering and acting like that was all there was.

This required a drastic cure.

And the 'moon' provided the perfect locale.

The only problem remaining was whether Boogiepop would view it as an enemy.

But no matter what problems it faced, it had no intention of ending this 'experiment'.

The King of Distortion.

That was its name.

12:01 P.M.

My stomach growled loudly.

Embarrassed, I blushed. I was the president of the discipline committee; it was my job to be fussy about the details. But that didn't mean I was required to get hungry exactly one minute after noon.

Boogiepop turned to look at me.

"Feeling hungry?"

"N-not really," I insisted. But I was definitely feeling it. I'd been planning on grabbing a burger after turning in the cram school application, so I hadn't eaten anything all day. Just the yogurt drink I'd gulped down before leaving the house.

"Hunger puts your nerves on edge. You should eat something."

"I don't have any food!"

Boogiepop produced a lunchbox from under his cloak and handed it to me. It was wrapped in a cute napkin.

"....."

It was clearly handmade. For two.

"Um, is this...?"

"Yes. Miyashita Touka made that to eat with Takeda Keiji."

"....."

I stared down at it.

"I-I can't eat this."

"Food is food."

"That's not the point! Poor Touka..."

"Don't worry. She'll just have to deal."

Don't say that with her face.

I stood there with the lunch in my hands for a good minute or two, but finally sighed, opened the lid, and split the chopsticks.

It bugged me that the onigiri were all different sizes and the sides

weren't chopped properly, but the flavor was pretty good.

"It's good," I said, quietly.

No response from Boogiepop.

But with food in my belly, I calmed down a little, enough to start wondering if I should really be sitting here eating at a time like this.

We'd come out of the eaves, and were somewhere near the entrance. The ground around the bench we were sitting on was covered in people. Not dead or anything, just asleep, but in this darkness the sounds of them groaning or muttering in their sleep felt like I was listening to the grumbling of the dead. It was...creepy.

Were they all meeting him? The King of Distortion? Like I'd met Saotome Masami?

"....."

I started to pick up the third onigiri with my chopsticks, and then sighed.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I don't know," Boogiepop replied.

That was all I'd been able to get out of this shinigami for a while now. He didn't seem inclined to take further action.

"But you're here because you sensed something, right? Don't you have any idea what that is?"

"If it was that easy, I wouldn't be here at all."

I gave up and went back to the lunch.

But Boogiepop went on.

"The one calling himself the King of Distortion has no destructive power. All he does is draw forth some sort of response from people. This isn't like the last time."

"Last time... you mean with the Manticore?"

"They were on the brink of creating something that would have devoured mankind. That was the real problem. That pitiable monster was beside the point. But this time...it seems like the real danger has not yet begun."

"...?"

He made it sound like what he said was obvious, but I didn't follow at all. I doubt Miyashita Touka would have, either.

Just what was going on under that hat?

Once again, my obsession with clarifying things had me on edge. There was far too much I didn't know about the figure in front of me, far too much I might never know.

There are definitely similarities to multiple personality disorder, but...

After everything was over, I'd asked my friend Suema Kazuko about it. She knew a lot about abnormal psychology. According to her...

"Multiple personality disorder? Like how?"

"Um... just, like... their personality suddenly changes and..."

"I can't say for certain. But Niitoki-san... there is one thing I know for sure. Nearly all instances of multiple personality disorder are fake."

"Hunh?"

"Lies and acting. Almost every time."

"B-but...not every time?"

"Sure. But we have no way of ever *proving* that. Multiple Personality Disorder is nothing more than a theory. One created by Stevenson for Jekyll and Hyde. If something like that existed, it would explain why people suddenly change. The theory was mostly popularized in America, where lawyers trying to make a name for themselves used the idea to bolster claims their clients were not guilty by reason of insanity."

"....."

"Niitoki-san, even you have at least one secret, right? Can you really say you've never had to put on a performance to keep that secret? A performance that might make you seem very different from your usual self? But claiming that as a distinct personality is a quite a leap."

"I-I get that, but..."

"Human hearts are really very flexible. You know how in melodramas they always go on about not lying to yourself? We do that all the time. To the point of inventing a new personality. But ultimately, that's still that person's actual personality, to my mind. It just seems

obvious that personalities and human minds have far more sides to them than people tend to think.”

“B-but, isn’t it true they sometimes don’t know they have another personality?”

“Mm, that’s the thing. That’s the problem. They claim they don’t remember at all. But how can we prove that?”

“Hunh? Um...”

“Give them a lie detector test? All that measures is stuff like how much you’re sweating. Useless on any decent actor. People have fooled them by sweating when telling the truth, and faking calm when they’re lying. Measure their brain waves? Only thing that shows with any degree of reliability is if you’re awake or asleep. So what? Pray to God?”

“Hmm.”

“Multiple Personality Disorder is a kind of Xenon’s paradox. Maybe they’re lying. But if we try to prove they aren’t... well, that’s easier said than done. Obviously, someone bad at it will get caught quickly. Even in courts, it gets rejected most of the time. But if it’s really elaborate, then why go that far to hide anything? That’s another condition all together. That makes it even harder to figure out if it’s actually MPD. After all, there’s clearly something wrong with them.”

“My head’s spinning.”

“In my book, Multiple Personality Disorder is a product of desire—the desire to have an action we took be the work of someone else entirely. When they catch compulsive shoplifters, they often claim it wasn’t them, their hands just did it on their own. Just like MPD.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“Everyone feels like that sometimes. And that makes us want to believe MPD is real. I think. And in that sense, I guess you could say it really does exist.”

“.....”

Suema’s ideas definitely made sense to me. But that meant Boogiepop wasn’t the result of MPD. Miyashita Touka was always Boogiepop and was just acting like she wasn’t. Or Boogiepop was pretending to be super normal high school girl Miyashita Touka.

It really didn't seem like that was true, though...

I stared at him a while. Then Boogiepop started whistling.

The same song he'd whistled last time. The Overture to the first act of "Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg."

A cheery tune totally inappropriate for a darkened room full of unconscious bodies.

"You're good," I said.

Boogiepop looked amused.

"Second time I've been told that," he said.

"Who was the first?"

"Takeda-kun."

Of course that got to me.

"Senpai knows about you?"

"Mm."

"What does he think?"

"He's a good guy," Boogiepop said. With Miyashita Touka's face, that felt meaningful.

"I bet you're a pain in his side."

Boogiepop's response wasn't denial or a smile, but a strange, asymmetrical expression.

"Probably."

I wasn't sure what to think. I mean, we were romantic rivals. At least, his other side was.

"Why does Miyashita-san love Takeda-senpai?" I found myself asking.

"Well, I'm not really sure. But I doubt her reasons are any different than yours."

"Oh."

I didn't know what else to say.

What was I supposed to do with that information?

But the shinigami blithely ignored my confusion.

"Why do you love Takeda-kun?" he asked.

“I-It’s hard to put into words...”

My head was spinning. I just couldn’t talk about this with Miyashita Touka’s face looking at me. How could I? Should I just get mad at him? But I didn’t feel at all angry.

“...because he’s nice, I guess. He’s helped me out a lot. When we were both on the Health Committee, he took on a lot of tasks I was supposed to do...”

The more I talked the more pathetic it sounded.

“Sounds like him,” Boogiepop said, sounding impressed.

“Is that what Miyashita-san sees in him?”

“Well...I’m not even sure that’s why you actually love Takeda-kun, so I couldn’t say.”

“...what do you mean?”

“It all sounds like reasons you came up with after the fact. You found yourself liking him first, and then you found a way to explain it. However forced it may sound.”

He seemed oddly confident about his assessment.

“Y-you can say that, but...”

I didn’t have a “but.” I usually spoke my mind pretty clearly, but with Boogiepop it was always like pulling teeth.

“Well, what about you? What’s your opinion of Takeda-senpai?”

“I have no self. My thoughts on anyone are of no concern.”

“That’s cheating!” I said. Mad not at Miyashita Touka, but at him.

“I’m grateful to Takeda-kun. He’s the only one who’s ever called me a friend.” He made that face again, the lopsided one. “In that sense, perhaps I’m even jealous. Of you, and of Miyashita Touka.”

This caught me by surprise.

My jaw dropped. I must have looked really dumb.

Suddenly the entire Moon Temple shook. An earthquake? No, it didn’t feel right.

It was like something gigantic had tackled the building.

“Grrrrrrrrrrr...”

An awful noise, like the howl of a beast. It seemed both far away

and really close at the same time; I couldn't grasp the scale of the noise at all.

"...!"

Boogipop scowled and stood up.

"Wh-what was that?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He just ran off, toward the top of the building.

"W-wait!" I tried to chase after him.

But I heard something else from below. Something vibrating.

A cell phone?

I looked toward it. The phone's owner was on his side, not moving...but his arm alone moved on its own, answering the phone.

"Yes? No, the chief said we should start handing out the stall food to everyone, so... Yes, understood. We'll do that. Roger that."

He hung up.

His voice sounded normal, but his eyes were closed the whole time.

Wh-what the...?!

What was that?

It was like he'd answered the phone without ever engaging his mind, on autopilot, or like...

"Like a second personality... Boogipop!"

I called after him, but he was long gone.

"....."

I looked back down at the guy with the phone.

And froze to the spot.

The figures lying around me were no longer unconscious people. They'd been replaced with those twisted mannequins. The floor was covered with the grotesque creations...

"Ah...ah...?"

My ear caught a snatch of that song.

Dahhdadadan, dan da-dan!

“Custard Pie.”

“...eep!”

I crouched, terrified.

I’d already woken up, but...

That voice again, from behind me.

“He left at last. So...what were we talking about?”

The King of Distortion, wearing Saotome Masami’s face. Sitting on the bench we’d been on, smiling at me.

12:24 P.M.

Hmm, fair enough. Go ahead and start giving out lunches.

Don't let the crowd get angry. No telling what would happen. Thanks."

I was watching a man in a suit talking on a phone outside the Moon Temple. Presumably to somebody inside. Didn't seem like there was anything weird going on. Just some stuck doors.

"Still..."

I, Takeda Keji, looked up at the Moon Temple through the rain.

Touka had not shown up for our date, and when Touka didn't show up, I had to consider that *he'd* show up again. And the situation in front of me seemed like the most likely cause.

I could hear Led Zeppelin playing somewhere.

"Hmm..."

Touka had asked me not to call her home, so I wasn't going to do that. Yet. But I felt like if I did, she wouldn't be there.

"Hmm..."

I'd been going back and forth between where we were supposed to meet and the commotion going on around the Moon Temple.

It was a huge mess.

People were coming and going. Cops, too. But only a few, and they seemed mainly interested in crowd control and traffic. Didn't seem like they were even trying to bust the doors in.

There were a few technical types standing around, muttering to each other under their umbrellas.

"How do we not have any blueprints?"

"He deleted them himself. Wanted to make it so the same thing could never be built again."

"The hubris... and this is the result."

"Think this could be a time delay of some kind? Something he set before his death?"

“Don’t even suggest that!”

The others hastily shushed the speaker, and looked around nervously. I hastily feigned indifference.

“He” could only be the man who’d built this place, Teratsuki Kyoichiro. I didn’t know much about the Moon Temple, but I’d come across his name any number of times in my line of work. He was a legend.

Had he set a trap? Was there really nothing wrong inside?

And was Touka in there, too? Or...more likely...

“Boogiepop?”

I shivered, remembering the illusion I’d seen that morning.

He’d called himself the King of Distortion. Did he have anything to do with this?

Was this a danger to the world?

“Hmm...”

But there was nothing I could do except fret, get wet and stare up at this twisted black tower.

Then...there was a thud. And the ground shook.

“An earthquake? But that would be more...”

There was another thud, and another. Shaking everything around.

12:42 P.M.

Hinako and I were under a tree, opening our picnic baskets.

The contents weren't very ladylike—cutlet sandwiches and salty edamame.

“Heh heh... I brought some beer, too,” Hinako said, grinning.

She opened the cooler.



I smiled, too. I took the can she offered, and held it to my cheek. The cold metal felt amazing after that walk through this sweltering heat.

The cicadas were so loud.

We tapped our cans together, and I took a bite of my sandwich. The bread split, but the bread held it in place. There was no katsu sauce—instead, the bread had a nice spice to it and the meat was juicy.

“This is good!”

“Eat up, I brought a lot.”

The edamame were salted just right. After all that sweaty work, my body was craving salt. The beers went perfectly with everything, too.

“Hey, Hinako.”

“Mm?”

“Do you forgive me?”

It took a lot for me to ask that.

Whoever it was behind her face smiled at me.

“I’m not the one who can grant you forgiveness,” it said.

“Yeah, I know. I just wanted to ask. I don’t know if an apology would ever be enough.”

“How often do you really remember me?”

“Um...”

“You’d completely forgotten about me until we met here.”

It was right. I stared at my hands.

“Sorry.”

It shook its head.

“No. You forgot because your guilt was too much to bear.”

“.....”

“And that kept you bound, though you weren’t consciously aware of it. But no matter how much time passes, Hinako will never be anything but a source of harm to you. When by all rights, you should be enjoying yourself, as we are now.”

“That’s what you call ‘gold’?”

“That’s whatever you feel has that shine.”

“But this is just an illusion.”

I let myself say it. No matter how much I wanted not to say it, I had to. No matter how you looked at it, this couldn’t possibly be real.

“Hinako died long ago, and I’m sure she died mad at me. Here? We’re having fun. But...”

I stared at my knees, forcing the words out.

“So what?” The voice asked, soft and gentle. “Is that why you’re clinging to what happened, living your life in fear of Hinako’s anger?”

“Of course I am! What else is there?”

“There are always options. You just haven’t found them yet. But there are infinite ways of looking at things.”

The voice had suddenly become a man’s voice. Surprised, I looked up.

He was very handsome. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. I could only tell it was the same person who’d been Hinako by the color of his eyes.

“I’ve seen you before... recently.”

I recognized that face.

From the pamphlet. It was Teratsuki Kyoichiro.

“A face pulled from your memory... at least, according to Habara Kentaro.”

He grinned. I’d never heard that name before. But I was in no state of mind to ask about that.

“Then...you’re the King of Distortion?”

That made sense.

“Well. That hardly matters.” He nodded. “The problem is that you wish to beg forgiveness, but nobody can possibly grant that to you. No matter what I say in Hinako’s form, it’ll sound like a verdict to your ears. Whether you know this is an illusion or not.”

“.....”

He was right. No matter what Hinako said to me, I would have to

accept it.

So why wouldn't he just let me have that?

The King of Distortion took one of the cutlet sandwiches.

"You mind?" he asked.

"Hunh? N-no, go ahead."

They weren't mine in the first place, but I said it anyway. I knew he'd been Hinako a moment before, but this helped them feel distinct.

The King of Distortion took a bite, savoring it.

"This is good! I see. In your mind, Hinako really was a person with great taste."

".....?"

What did that mean? Were my feelings about Hinako creating this illusion? It sure sounded like it.

"Th-then...I'm making all of this? This summer, this whole world?"

That couldn't be true.

If it was, then who was the King of Distortion?

The very fact that he was here contradicted that theory. Or was there some other answer, one I just hadn't figured out?

"....."

The King of Distortion grinned at me.

My memories were fuzzy, but I did my best to remember where I really was.

I think—I felt like there were a lot of people around. And...were we locked up somewhere?

What had happened to all of them?

Were they all in their own worlds, like me?

In that case—was the King of Distortion with all of them? Were there as many Kings of Distortion as there were minds trapped here?

Was he...multiplying?

What did that mean? But the more I tried to think, the more the overwhelming reality of the cicadas and the sunshine and the smell of

grass on the wind and the heat beating down made those thoughts seem awfully empty. The tension was getting to me, and I took a sip of beer, and the bubbles running down my throat made me lose my train of thought, made me forget I was even trying to think.

But before I did, I had one thing to ask the man with the kind eyes.

“Are you...‘using’ me? Us? I don’t know what for, but...”

“What if I am?” The King of Distortion’s smile never wavered. “Will you see me as evil? Fight me? I am distortion, and if making me your enemy will resolve your problems, then that is one solution.”

“.....”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, and to cover my confusion, I reached for an edamame.

It was really good.

Hinako had made these.

“.....”

I didn’t know what to do, so I just kept eating edamame like an idiot, and drinking beer.

“Is it good?” Hinako said. She was here again.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding.

I felt like there was something I needed to find. But until I knew what...I would be trapped here.

“.....”

Oh dear.

That sounded like a really appealing proposition.

I sat in silence for a long time. Then...

In the distance, I could hear a rumble. It was really far away, so I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like the sound was coming repeatedly. Thud. Thud. Thud. What could it be?

“Like footsteps...”

Was there a faint roar, too?

“Oh, Zoragi? Don’t worry about him,” the thing with Hinako’s face said.

“Zoragi?”

What?

“Like I said, don’t worry about it.”

She seemed ever so slightly annoyed.

1:37 P.M.

If Teratsuki Kyoichiro is the culprit, what exactly did he do?"

Shiro asked.

"We can come up with any number of explanations," I said.

"Spread a psychotropic gas of some kind. Whatever."

We were searching the floors, in the darkness.

"Gas?"

Like me, Shiro was trying to find a way into the back channels of this strange building, any sort of passage below the floors or above the ceilings. There were sleeping bodies all around us, but we didn't have time to check on each of them.

We'd decided instead to do what we could to solve this mess on our own. Shiro seemed to feel like we had no choice, since we couldn't make contact with anyone outside, but I actually had a cell phone with me. If I wanted, I could call for help. But I wanted to avoid that as long as I could.

"Thank about it. Why else would this building be hermetically sealed like this? There aren't even any windows! Perfect design to spread gas around."

"I supposed that makes sense... but basically any high-rise building is the same. Even if they have windows, you can't open them."

"That's true... but what's the point of making it so dark in here? There has to be one, right?"

"Hmm..."

Neither of us could think of anything.

"And why make the whole building into one giant staircase? Was he just crazy?"

"Reminds me of those games where you climb the demon lord's tower."

"Ugh, don't remind me."

It really did feel like that. Teratsuki Kyoichiro had owned game

companies, too. He'd probably played a few.

But this wasn't a game. I was taking this pretty seriously. If I could solve this mess on my own, maybe Nagi would respect me a little more.

Sure, go ahead, tell me how selfish that motive is. But I was serious about solving this myself.

"Oh, there's a door over here!" Shiro said. I ran over to him.

"Is it locked?"

"The lock's busted," he said, opening the door. "Guess somebody already came through."

"Already?" I clicked my tongue. There was no point if someone beat me to it.

But Shiro wasn't thinking along those lines at all.

"We'd better get after them," he said, nodding at me. "We might be able to help."

"Sure," I said. I wasn't thrilled, but what else could I do?

Inside the door, even the exit sign was off. It was truly pitch black.

I lit our way with a pen-sized high-beam light I'd brought with me. Spending time with Nagi led directly to carrying stuff like this around with you. I'd avoided using it until now to avoid draining the battery too fast, but with this darkness, we needed it.

There were rows of bizarre...art projects? Shaped like humans, but twisted, seemingly at random.

"What *are* these?" Shiro said, as baffled as he was surprised to discover them.

"Teratsuki Kyoichiro's hobby," I shrugged. "He was sort of famous for it, even held a few exhibitions."

"Sick."

"I agree! And it sounds like he used his artistic side to help him seduce a lot of women. According to the gossip pages, anyway."

"Hunh... does that really work?"

Shiro seemed skeptical. He was the kind of guy who'd show up in a place like this just to pay his respects to one girl, so how could he understand how a playboy who went from one girl to another thought? Not that I did, either.

We moved through the art projects, proceeding downward in the hopes of finding the control room.

But we soon hit a dead end. There was nothing down below. Just a storeroom.

“So...maybe above us? Like the top floor? Even more like a video game...” I muttered.

Shiro was still rummaging around.

“Mm? Looking for something?”

“Wondering if we can get out here. I feel like there should be an exit somewhere...”

Practical. But I hoped he was wrong. If we could get out and call for help, I'd lose my chance to show Nagi what I could do.

“Y-you think? He went and sealed everything off pretty thoroughly. Doubt he'd leave an exit down here.”

“Yeah?” Shiro sounded disappointed. “But if what she said is true, *he* got in here somehow. Might be a clue there,” he muttered.

“Let's not waste our time. C'mon, we got a long climb ahead of us.”

I was being a little too pushy, but Shiro just nodded.

“Yeah, okay.”

We started moving back up, but soon hit another dead end. There was a support pillar crossing the passage and the gap left was too narrow for a person to fit through.

“Well, crap. Guess we've got to leave the way we came in, and find a different entrance.”

“Yeah...no help for it.”

We limped back down.

Shiro stepped out on the main floor first.

“What the...?” he said, looking ahead of us.

“What? What's wrong?” I asked, and pushed past him.

My jaw dropped.

The floor was still shrouded in darkness. The only thing lighting the good-for-the-soul geometric unbalance of the design was the green

lights of the exit signs.

But there was one thing radically different.

There was nobody here.

Every single person who'd been lying on the floor was gone.

"Where'd they go?" Shiro asked me. Like I'd know.

"Did they all wake up and evacuate down below?" I wondered. But if they had, we'd still be able to hear them underneath us. But the place was dead quiet, like a deserted theater.

The sound of my footsteps echoed loudly.

But the seventh step...

Was a thunderous rumble.

"...?!"

I jumped, and retracted the step.

But as my foot touched the floor again, there was another impact, one that shook the entire building.

"Wh-what the...?!"

Spooked, I took a few quick steps, and every one of them shook the building. Like I'd become...some sort of giant monster.

A monster...?!

The name "Zoragi" floated across my mind. What was that again? I knew that name from somewhere. But I couldn't quite place it.

I lost my balance, and fell to the ground.

But the massive footsteps went on. No longer matching mine. They were getting bigger. Closer.

My fingers touched something. I looked down, and froze.

"...?!"

It was super thin and I hadn't even seen it was there when I was walking around. I didn't notice that wafer-thin layer until I touched it.

It was a *person*.

A human body, *smashed flat*, as if *crushed under a colossal weight*.

Looking around, there were lots of them. Covering the floor.

"J-Jesus...!"

The people hadn't vanished. They'd been here all along. We just hadn't noticed.

"Aughhhhh...!"

I panicked. I tried to kick the flattened human away. But it didn't budge. And—it didn't *smell*. It was like it was out of sync with where I was.

"...elp," one of the flattened people said. "...help...help me...!"

It reached its flattened arm out towards me. It had no joints or bones left, but the paper-thin arm lifted off the floor, reaching for me.

"Wh... wh-wh-what the hell is going on?!" I screamed.

The massive footsteps were almost on top of me.

Terrified, I scrambled across the floor. As I did, something fell out of my pocket.

My cell phone.

"...!"

Oh, I thought.

This was no time to be a show-off. Nagi. Kirima Nagi, the Fire Witch...she could do something about this waking nightmare.

I had her on quick dial, so it took less than a second.

The ringtone sounded severely lacking in urgency.

Come on! Answer! What are you doing?

Just as my panic reached its peak, there was a faint click, and someone answered.

"Taniguchi speaking." A boy's voice.

"Masaki?!" I yelled.

Taniguchi Masaki. Different last name, but he was Nagi's half-brother. I'd met him a few times.

"Oh, Kentaro-san? What's up? How you been?"

I didn't have time for this. I yelled over him, "Where's Nagi?! Is she there?!"

"Nagi? Why? Weird time of day to call begging for a date!"

Masaki thought I was Nagi's boyfriend, so this wasn't completely

crazy. I usually sort of enjoyed playing along, but this was really not the time.

“Just put her on! Hurry!”

“Your funeral.”

“What?!”

“I mean...” he chuckled. “Kentaro-san, what number did you call?”

“Hunh...?”

For a minute, I didn’t catch his drift. But then my brain caught up to me.

Nagi had a cell phone. She never went anywhere without it. That was the number I called in emergencies.

Why would Masaki ever answer that phone?

“Heh heh heh...”

His laugh echoed over the line.

“Wh-who are you?!”

“Now, now, Kentaro-san. I’m sure you already know! Are you just pretending you don’t? I understand. Sometimes you just have to hear the truth out loud.”

His laugh mingled with a jangly rocky song, one I’d already grown really sick of.

Dahhddadadan, dan da-dan...

“Custard Pie.”

That voice again.

“See, I can’t let you call for help. My ‘experiment’ has only just begun! It would never do to ruin it now.”

I screamed.

2:06 P.M.

There was a localized earthquake happening around the Moon Temple.

I, Takeda Keiji, was not the only one standing around gawking at it. There was quite a crowd, all looking astonished.

“Wh-what the heck?!”

“The way the ground’s shaking... like footsteps?” someone said.

It really did feel like a really powerful sumo stomp.

Definitely not anything that could occur naturally. It was too regular.

What’s going on? Is Touka in there? Is she okay?

I stared up at the building. It was swaying from side to side.

The Moon Temple staff had no idea what to do.

“We can’t contact anyone inside?”

“The signals must be jammed somehow...”

As they yelled, the asphalt near the Moon Temple suddenly cracked.

Leaving a giant hole, as if an invisible foot had sunk into the ground.

The crowd screamed.

“A sinkhole?!”

“The ground collapsed?!”

The shape of that hole sure didn’t look like it, but what else could it be?

But if the ground was unsteady...

“I-Is the building about to fall?!” someone yelled.

Another hole yawned open.

Another scream raced through the crowd. People started tossing their umbrellas, heedless of the rain, and running away. Total panic.

“Unh!”

I was the only one trying to get closer to the Moon Temple.

Was this what the staff had been talking about? Was this all Teratsuki Kyoichiro’s doing?

Or...

Is the world in danger, Boogiepop?!

Another section of the ground caved in.

2:14 P.M.

Hashizaka Makoto was only eight, and never thought it was weird that he didn't have a father.

He knew that he officially didn't have one, but his mother Shizuka was always saying things like, "What would he think of that?" so it felt less like he didn't have one and more that there was something secret about him. At kindergarten, his class had once been told to draw their fathers, and he hadn't hesitated at all, just gone ahead and drawn one.

But when he showed it to the teacher, she looked confused.

"Makoto-kun, what is this?"

"Daddy."

But the picture she was looking at was a monster with six legs and something growing out of its back that was either a tail or a spike of some kind.

"Your father looks like this?"

"He doesn't look like anything," Makoto said, firmly.

This teacher didn't know he came from a single-parent household. It was in her notes but she'd never read them.

"Is this a joke? Take this seriously," she scolded.

"I am," Makoto said, indignantly.

"But..."

"When I dream about Daddy, he's like that."

The teacher's frown deepened, and she took a breath, ready to yell.

Fortunately the other teacher, who did know about Makoto's family, noticed what was happening and stepped in.

"H-he does? Let me see!" He took the picture from her, whispering, "Single mother," in her ear. She cringed and he hastily covered for her, distracting Makoto by saying, "What a great drawing. Does it have a name?"

“Mm. Zoragi!”

“Zo...? I...I see. What a great name!” With a smile and nod, he gave the picture back to Makoto. “Why don’t you try drawing me next?” he said, concerned about the questions he’d receive if there was a picture of a monster between all the other dads.

“Okay!” Makoto said, and did what he was told, drawing a normal person.

None of this bothered Makoto in the slightest.

But after that he didn’t talk about Zoragi much. Especially with his mother. He was sure if he told her his father was a monster she’d get angry.

Makoto wasn’t actually sure if that monster was his father or not. He said he dreamed about it, but it didn’t seem like he only saw Zoragi in his sleep.

For example, his mother once took him out on a walk around town, and he looked up at the sky and thought he saw Zoragi’s giant face looming between two buildings. Another time they were in a café in a department store several floors up and he thought he saw something go past outside the windows. But everyone said it was just his imagination. If he insisted it wasn’t, they’d all start looking worried, so he stopped.

Makoto had named it Zoragi. He wasn’t sure where that name came from. It just seemed to apply to everything scary. The kind of scary thing that was right there, like it owned the place, but nobody else noticed.

In his dreams, it was even more blatant, flattening the city underfoot. It didn’t care about people, buildings, roads, factories, or schools, it just stomped them all flat. Even when they were flattened, people didn’t notice; they just kept going about their lives. Makoto watched all this with no trace of alarm. To him, this was just the way things were.

“Unh...unhhhh...”

Makoto was curled up, clutching his head, as the Moon Temple shook.

Zoragi was circling the building. Every footstep felt like an earthquake.

Kentaro had told him to wait here, and then went upstairs, but he hadn't come back, and Makoto was all alone and scared.

Why was any of this happening, anyway?

Even Makoto knew the song they'd heard was named "Custard Pie." It was a song his mother listened to sometimes. The words were in English so he didn't understand them, but when she listened to it she always looked so mad. Makoto didn't know why—it seemed like a happy song to him.

But shortly after his mother dragged him into the Moon Temple, that song started playing, and everything got weird.

The people around him had suddenly vanished.

His mom was gone, too, and he was left alone in the Moon Temple, like the place had suddenly died. Nobody else there. The thing with insect-like, clouded-glass eyes did not appear to him.

He considered crying, but with no one around to hear him it seemed like a waste of time, so he just wandered outside. The doors weren't shut or anything.

There was no one outside, either.

The streets were deserted, with rows of silent buildings looming overhead. Once, he'd gone to a temple and cemetery for the funeral of one of his mother's relatives. Hashizaka Shizuka's relations with her family were strained enough that she usually didn't go to services or visit graves. But the rows of black square things and hard grey things he'd seen that day, in quantities that had seemed too vast to comprehend, looked just like the city today.

Like rows of giant gravestones.

"....."

He kept walking.

Oddly enough, he didn't feel lonely or afraid. Fear is born from the idea that *something's there* or *something's going to happen*, but here, it didn't seem like either of those concerns applied.

When he got tired he laid down by the side of the road. Nobody was here to yell at him.

He had no idea how far he walked, but he'd gone a long way before anything changed.

People. It seemed like they were the other people from inside the Moon Temple.

But none of them were talking. Or even moving.

Like mannequins, they just stood perfectly still, not moving a muscle.

They were standing here and there, at random locations unrelated to each other.

"Weird!" Makoto laughed. He pointed at one. They didn't react.

Then...

He heard a low growl, and the entire city started shaking.

After that, all he did was run. Zoragi trampled the silent, unmoving people underfoot, flattening them, chasing Makoto. It didn't seem like he was actually trying to trample Makoto, more like he was aimlessly wandering in the same direction, but since they were going the same way, he was doomed to get flattened like all the others.

Along the way he met Kentaro. Unlike everyone else, he saw Zoragi, and was running away from it, but now he was gone, too.

I'm sure Zoragi ate him.

Makoto was no longer unafraid. He was clutching his knees, shaking like a leaf.

Thud. Another impact rocked the Moon Temple.

Makoto looked up, and saw a giant hole yawning in the side of the Moon Temple. Zoragi's front leg was yanking rubble out of it.

"Grrrrrr."

A strange voice somewhere between a threatening growl and just his normal breathing. A red eye peering down at him.

"A-ughhh!"

Their eyes met. Makoto screamed.

Zoragi's massive maw opened, and bit into the side of the Moon Temple. Cutting edge resilient, modern architecture crumbled like a cracker.

"E-eeeeek!"

Makoto scrambled away. The ground in front of him was vanishing rapidly.

"H-help! Somebody, help me!"

He scrambled away across the floor, flailing his legs uselessly like a bug.

Until his back hit something hard.

"...!"

He jumped, and turned around. And his eyes went wide.

A shadow stood behind him.

"Hello there. What's wrong?" the shadow said.

It wore a black hat and a black cloak, but its face was white with black lipstick. Very sinister. He couldn't tell how old the thing was, or even if it was a boy or a girl.

Makoto's mouth moved, but the words that came out didn't make much sense.

"Z...Zozozozoragi..."

"Zoragi?" The shadow looked puzzled. "What's that?"

"I-It's right in front of us!"

"Hmm?" the shadow followed Makoto's finger, looking right at Zoragi. "I'm afraid I can't see it."

"What are you talking about?! The monster! Run before it eats you!"

"A monster, hmm?"

The figure made a strange face, half smiling, half playing dumb.

"A giant monster. So that's your King of Distortion, is it? And one with actual destructive capabilities. Well, that's quite a thing, isn't it?"

"Hunh?"

Makoto didn't get what this shadow was saying at all.

Zoragi chomped down on the building again, shaking it.

“Can I ask one thing? Did this monster stomp everyone flat?”

“Y-yeah...”

“I see. So that’s why they don’t say anything but ‘Help’.” The shadow shrugged. “Well. This is a pickle. I’ve never fought a giant monster before,” it said.

2:21 P.M.

Wham! Once again, the Moon Temple shook, like someone was hitting it with a giant hammer.

I glared at the King of Distortion, who'd taken Saotome Masami's form.

"I'm starting to figure this out," I said.

"Figure out what, Niitoki-san?" it asked.

"Who you are, King of Distortion."

"Oh? And what am I?"

"At first, I thought this was another dimension you'd made, or at least some illusion you'd thrown me into. But if that was true, there'd be no way to contact the outside, and no way for Boogiepop to come into the illusion to help me. This isn't your illusion. You aren't pulling me into it."

"....."

"You're the one being pulled into it, King of Distortion. This is inside of me."

"Inside you?"

"To be blunt, I think you're my other personality. Suema-san said our personalities are far more multi-faceted than people think. And that's what you are. You're someone inside of me, someone normally locked away inside a box—and the King of Distortion is an invader borrowing that shape. You can't do anything yourself. All you can do is maintain your shape within the narrow confines of what already lies within us. You're a sad creature, with no will of your own."

The King of Distortion grinned.

"So what exactly is the King of Distortion?" it asked. Confidently.

This didn't dissuade me. "A parasite. That's the only explanation," I said.

I didn't know if it was a space invader or a psychic creature or just a ghost of some kind, but I knew one thing for sure.

I wasn't gonna let it win.

"So harsh. I suppose you did face the Manticore head on, Niitoki Kei."

"But, because this is your nature, you're bound by the limits of human potential. These shockwaves—those aren't your doing, are they? This is the power of someone else you've attached yourself to—something hidden you've accidentally unearthed."

That was the only thing that made sense. I'd felt those tremors before getting pulled back in here.

"....."

The smile faded from the King of Distortion's face.

"And it's on a rampage, and threatening you as well. Right?" I demanded.

It shrugged. "Its name is Zoragi. A monster dozens of meters tall. So massive its existence is separating from the host. Its power will soon destroy the Moon Temple. But it doesn't seem to have any real goal in mind, so it isn't attacking all that aggressively. Still," he spread his hands, as if helpless. "If it really wants to, it could turn this building to dust in seconds."

"Then stop what you're doing this instant!" I yelled. "If you stop doing this to everyone, it'll disappear! Just like you pulled away when Boogiepop showed up!"

"But if I do that, will the Saotome Masami-kun within you disappear as well, President?"

There was a sharpness to his tone, like the words were stabbing into me.

"Th-that hardly matters now..."

"It does. At the least, if your 'alternate personality' theory is correct, it can never leave you. The Teratsuki Kyoichiro inside Hashizaka Shizuka, the Suzuki Hinako inside Michimoto Sakiko...none of them will vanish."

"Argh..."

"It makes sense. I am inside of you. That's why I know what you know. Remember what else Suema Kazuko said? 'Multiple personality disorder is fake.' The distorted desire to make what they did into

something they didn't."

"B-but that's..."

"So if I am your alternate personality, you must become conscious of the 'desire' that created me. Why am I here? You must find the answer. No matter how hard that is, no matter how much you wish to turn your back on it."

"....."

"Until that pain turns into gold."

"....."

Even as he spoke, the shocks of Zoragi's attacks grew stronger. "Wh-what about you? Do you really have time to waste on me?"

There was a hint of panic in my voice. But the King of Distortion just smiled.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It looks like *he's* going to take care of things. I've no idea what he intends to do...but I plan to enjoy the show."

2:30 P.M.

Zoragi was beginning to get an inkling as to why it was born.

It had no goal. It was a being that existed purely to destroy.

It had no joy or anger. It was automated, like a machine.

What should it destroy? Everything. What should it do after it destroyed everything? Destroy it some more.

It had been wandering aimlessly, occasionally destroying things simply because it was gigantic, and because of the energy it gave off; but as it became self-aware, Zoragi began to destroy things intentionally.

The Moon Temple was in front of it, so Zoragi opened its massive jaws, and took a bite.

Through the hole the bite created was the one who'd given birth to Zoragi, the 'placenta' that prevented it from being truly free. When Zoragi had first been born, it had needed this human, but now it was time to cut the umbilical cord. Only then could Zoragi fully manifest.

"Grrrrrrrrr...!"

Zoragi growled, and the human squealed, backing away.

A shadow appeared behind him, like a black pipe. The shadow spoke briefly to the human, then sighed, and turned to face Zoragi.

Despite its insignificant size, the shadow's eyes met Zoragi's.

The shadow whispered, "Ah...our wavelengths have aligned. I can see you now."

"Y-you can see it?"

The shadowy figure seemed sure of itself, but Makoto did not find this comforting.

"What now?"

“Mm? It came to fight, so I’ll have to return the favor.”

“Y-you’re gonna fight *that*?”

“What else can I do?”

The shadow abruptly picked Makoto up.

Before he could even yelp, the shadow leapt sideways.

A moment later Zoragi’s fangs snapped shut right where they’d been. They barely escaped in time.

Then Zoragi let out an awful scream, and pulled its head out of the Moon Temple.

“Wh-what?”

In the shadow’s arms, Makoto looked up at the monster, wondering what had happened.

The shadow clicked its tongue. “I missed. It’s faster than I thought.”

“Hunh?” Makoto said, confused. Then he saw purple blood flowing from one of Zoragi’s eyes. There was a cut open on the bulging surface of the eye.

“Wh-what did you do?”

“I failed. I intended that to finish it off...”

The shadow tossed aside the thin wire it had used to slice up Zoragi’s eye, and broke into a run, putting some serious distance between them.

Zoragi’s scream gave way to anger, and it attacked, pounding the building with its massive front legs.

The shadow dodged. Hole after hole opened in the side of the Moon Temple, like cannon fire.

“Merely wounding it puts us at a disadvantage. That body is too tough to harm.”

“B-but...what are you?! You can fight monsters?!”

“My name is Boogiepop,” the shadow said. It ran on, Makoto held tight under its arm.

Behind them, destruction followed right on their heels.

“W-wait, Boogiepop! Why are we going up?!”

The way the Moon Temple was built, once you went up, there was no other way back down.

“You think it’ll corner us?” Boogiepop said. It sounded faintly bemused.

“Wh-wh-what are you thinking?!”

“Why do you ask?” Boogiepop said, puzzled.

“But...I mean...”

“Of course we’re going up. Where else can we go?” As if this was the most natural thing in the world.

Makoto’s mouth gaped open. No words came.

But there was one thing he knew for sure.

As crazy as Zoragi existing was, this Boogiepop thing was every bit as bizarre.

For a while Zoragi lashed out indiscriminately, letting the rage take hold, but soon it began to calm down.

Its target had nowhere to go. They were in a confined space, with no way out. That made it easy. For something human sized, the Moon Temple was huge and full of space to run and hide, but for Zoragi, they were like a water flea in a goldfish bowl. Perhaps crushing a single insect was difficult. But...

“Grrrrrr...”

Zoragi backed away from the Moon Temple.

Lightning crackled between the spikes on its back.

At first, the bolts shot everywhere, striking buildings on all sides, but gradually they focused upon a single target.

Concentrating on the Moon Temple.

“Grrrrrr...”

As Zoragi’s lightning peppered the Moon Temple, a door in the top floor opened, and a shadow stepped out.

As everything around it crumbled, it ignored the lightning, staring

directly at Zoragi.

“Augh! Wh-what’s going on?!” Makoto screamed.

“To kill a water flea in a goldfish bowl, break the bowl. Pretty smart monster,” Boogiepop said, sounding impressed.

“H-how can you be so calm?!” Makoto yelled.

A bolt of lightning struck the base of the Moon Temple.

The building swayed. It was sturdily built, but the architects never designed it to survive this kind of abuse.

As the roof began to lean, Makoto let out a wordless shriek.

Boogiepop placed its black lips at Makoto’s ear—given the noise around them, this was the only way he’d be able to hear—and spoke, its tone of voice not altered at all.

“Have you—”

“Hunh?”

“Have you ever—”

What? Makoto frowned, trying to concentrate.

More lightning struck home, and the Moon Temple swayed like an anemic girl. As it did, Boogiepop asked that same ludicrous question a third time.

“Have you ever gone bungee jumping?”

With Makoto held tight under his arm, the shadow jumped.

As it did, the Moon Temple collapsed with a thunderous roar.

“Grrr...?”

Zoragi saw something leap away from the building, and was confused.

What was it doing?

There was no chance of surviving that fall. Unless it was up to something?

To prevent whatever that was, Zoragi leaned in, jaws yawning wide.

The shadow was bobbing in mid-air, the child held under his arms. As Zoragi's jaws closed, it suddenly moved.

“Grahhh...?!”

A shock ran through Zoragi's body.

Bungee jumping.

The principle behind it was simple.

Wrap a lifeline around yourself, and fall. That's it. All that remained was where to attach the lifeline.

If the ground under your feet was crumbling away, what was there to attach it to?

However, Makoto was far too overwhelmed to ask this obvious question. Everything had happened far too fast.

A burst of wind as they fell, then a swirl, then a burst of wind from the other direction...and then his body was already bounding, floating, and steady.

Then Makoto spied a thin wire running from Boogiepop's arm to Zoragi's head.



Their lifeline was secured to the monster looming above them. So why had Zoragi frozen, immobilized? Exactly *what part* of it was the wire wrapped around?

There was a snap, and their bodies began to fall. But they weren't far above ground now, and Boogiepop easily landed upright.

And a moment later something fell out of the sky.

It was the size of a truck; bulky, wet, and twitching.

It was...

"?! Th-that's... um... um..." Makoto stammered, uselessly.

"Yes...Zoragi's tongue."

"....."

"A weak point on any creature. Rip it out from the root, and they won't survive," Boogiepop said, quietly.

The giant monster began to slowly topple over. Its body landed on the buildings nearby, knocking them over...and then went still.

"....."

Makoto stood stunned.

Boogiepop had put him down, and he was standing on his own two feet, but he didn't notice.

His mouth flapped, his lips trembling.

"...ah...ahhh...ah ha...haha—"

His shoulders shook, a moan escaped his lips, and then a laugh exploded out of him.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha hah! Holy crap, we actually won!"

"With knowledge and courage, there is nothing that can't be done," the shadow intoned. "Everyone just forgets that."

Makoto just kept laughing, showing no signs of hearing.

At last, his knees buckled, and he collapsed on the pavement.

"Oops," Boogiepop said, catching him.

By then Makoko was already fast asleep. All the excitement had really taken it out of him.

Boogiepop stared down at his innocent face, and sighed. "You believed it at last? That took some doing," he whispered.

There was a slithering sound, something sliding across the ground. And a moment later Zoragi's massive form loomed over the rubble.

"Grrrraaaghhh!" it roared, its mouth yawning wide. A new tongue was already growing in.

Not just the tongue; the punctured eye was filling in again, reborn. "....."

Holding Makoto, Boogiepop looked up at it.

Eyes ten times larger than Boogiepop's stared back.

Facing each other down in silence.

At last the shadow shrugged.

"As you can see, Zoragi-kun. Your way out is sealed."

Boogiepop stroked Makoto's cheek.

"....."

Zoragi didn't move.

"You can crush him, but that won't let you escape from here. Not until someone else perceives you."

"....."

The monster was silent.

But after a long silence, it shook itself, and turned its back. Footsteps rumbling, it walked away.

Crushing the town in this other reality, the monster retreated into the distance, its roar echoing like thunder in its wake.

"Sheesh."

In the darkness, Boogiepop's eyes opened.

Here in this reality, the Moon Temple still stood, shrouded in

silence.

Boogiepop was on his knees, with Hashizaki Makoto sleeping in his arms.

“You’re amazing, Boogiepop...” he muttered.

Boogiepop shrugged.

“Thanks. Though I do not deserve your praise.”

A faint line of blood ran from under the hat across his pale face. But there was no sign of pain in his expression, which remained neutral, like a doll’s face.

“I took a hit when we jumped...if I hurt this body, Takeda-kun will be furious.”

There was a trace of sadness in his voice.

Fragments fell from the ceiling. Boogiepop frowned.

“Some small portion of Zoragi’s power crossed the boundary? This building may not last much longer.”

Boogiepop rose to his feet.

2:46 P.M.

Seems like Zoragi went away,” whispered the King of Distortion. He was seated at the bar in the sky lounge, wearing Teratsuki Kyoichiro’s face. “Well done, Boogiepop. Quite a feather in your cap.”

“Zoragi? How do you know about Zoragi?” Hashizaka Shizuka said, surprised. She was seated next to him. “Zoragi’s that monster Makoto made up, right? How...?”

She’d been sitting with him this whole time. When she’d met Teratsuki Kyoichiro here, they’d long since retired to the bedroom, but this time...they just talked.

“Did you know? Zoragi is how Makoto-kun perceives his father.”

The King of Distortion rattled the ice cubes in his tumbler, grinning as if sharing a secret.

“What does that mean?”

“You may think you’ve told your son nothing about his father, but you’re mistaken. Your attitude, the things you don’t say, the look in your eye, the emotions you can’t help feeling... everything tells Makoto-kun things about his father.”

“.....”

Shizuka looked taken aback.

The King of Distortion laughed, softly. “And the result is a monster. Honestly, no kidding... one that nearly destroyed the world.”

“How so?”

As she asked, Shizuka realized that Makoto had never once asked her about his father.

“I’d say his absence scares you. A lot. If you had spared a little more thought to what that fear creates, I wouldn’t be forced to do all of this.”

“I was...afraid? Of you? You say I’m scared of you?”

Shizuka wasn’t sure why, but she felt this should be making her

angry.

The King of Distortion didn't answer.

“Well, not just fear. That's the tricky part. To a child, a giant monster is equally a target of fear and fantasy. And if that gets distorted? To straighten them out...well, that's easier said than done. I wonder if Boogiepop understands that...”

2:50 P.M.

Habara-san! Habara-san!”

Someone shook me, calling my name. I finally woke up.

“Habara-san, are you okay?”

Shiro had his hands on my shoulder.

“Uh, yeah... I’m fine. Don’t worry.” I shook him off. “But...what happened to me?”

“You suddenly shouted...and then you collapsed.”

“I... I did?”

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind.

I looked around. The crowd was lying there asleep, nothing else wrong with them. None of them had actually been crushed flat.

“Were they here when we came out that door?”

“Hunh?” Shiro looked baffled. “What do you mean?”

“N-never mind. Ugh,” I sighed.

When had the illusion started? I couldn’t trust my own senses at all.

I remembered my phone, but...

“.....”

Once again, I decided not to call. No telling what would answer.

“What’s up?” Shiro said, still clearly worried about me.

“Hmm...seems like it got to me again. Gotta be more careful.”

I slapped my cheeks.

We started moving again.

There had to be a control room somewhere in the building. We needed to find it.

A few minutes later, we discovered another door leading into the space below the floors.

This time, however, there was a woman slumped against it. We'd have to move her out of the way.

"Right..."

She was out like a light, so I didn't bother being too gentle. I just grabbed her under the arms and dragged her away.

But she groaned in her sleep. Hmm, I thought, and knelt down and lightly patted her cheek.

"Hey? Can you wake up? Snap out of it," I said, in her ear. She groaned again.

I took another look at her, and she seemed familiar.

"What is it?" Shiro said, coming over.

"Look, she's..."

"Oh, the girl from earlier. The one you laughed at for fighting with that guy."

"Seems like she might wake up."

I grabbed her shoulders and gave her a good hard shake.

"Hunh...?"

Shiro reached out and touched her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered open. She winced a second, and then her eyes snapped into focus.

2:56 P.M.

I wasn't immediately sure where I was.

I'd been sitting on the grass in mid-summer, eating and talking with Hinako.

But suddenly the world grew cold. Goosebumps popped up on my arms. I shivered.

"Cold!" I blurted.

"What, were you taken to summer?" the boy standing in front of me asked. It was dark around. I could barely see. But the voice sounded familiar.

I squinted, and realized there were two boys peering down at me. I remembered them. The two that had made fun of me earlier.

Earlier...

Oh, I thought.

That's right. I was in the Moon Temple.

It was February 14th, and I, Michimoto Sakiko, had come here with Takeshi...

"....."

But that didn't seem real.

It didn't feel like I was actually here. The place I'd been in was far more convincing. I didn't believe what I was looking at.

"....."

When I said nothing, the boys looked worried.

"You okay?"

"You feeling all right?"

I just gazed blankly up at them.

2:57 P.M.

You woke me up?" she said, blearily.

"Yeah. I'm Habara Kentaro. He's Tanaka Shiro."

The girl sighed. "Michimoto Sakiko."

She seemed really out of it.

"Michimoto-san, were you talking to the King of Distortion?" I asked.

She nodded, woozily.

"Tell us about it. Anything that'll help us figure out what it's up to."

Her gaze finally locked onto my face.

"Why do you ask?"

"We're gonna put an end to this. But we need more info."

"You? End this?" She didn't seem like she believed me.

"I know, I don't look like I can pull that off. But we mean business."

I glanced at Shiro, who nodded.

"Did you see anything weird before it all started? Anything that stuck out, that didn't seem like it belonged? We think there's something up with this building. Some trick to it."

"....."

She just frowned, then hung her head.

"What did the King of Distortion say to you?" she asked.

I shifted, nervously. "I... I imagine more or less the same as you."

That was a stretch.

"And you still think you can beat it?"

"When you put it that way...but if we don't at least try, who knows how long we'll be trapped in here? Don't want that, do we?"

“.....”

Michimoto Sakiko stared at us wordlessly, not answering.

“Habara-san, we can get through here,” Shiro said. He was at the door Michimoto Sakiko had been leaning against, holding it open. “I don’t think it’s unlocked, though. I don’t think it ever had a lock. Doesn’t look like they got around to installing one.”

“Good!” I said. I glanced back at Michimoto Sakiko. “We’re doing this. You don’t have to believe us, but... well, just wait and see, I guess.”

“.....”

We stepped back into the eaves. This time there was actually light. I looked up, and there were vents open to the outside world.

But that was all there was. This was just an empty corner of the building—it didn’t lead anywhere.

“Nothing here. Let’s go back.”

“Right.”

We turned back to the door, but...

The door slammed shut. And then we heard something heavy fall in front of it.

“...?!”

We ran over to it, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Wh-what the heck?” we yelled.

“You’re staying put,” Michimoto Sakiko said.

“Wh-what?!”

“I won’t let you interfere,” she shrieked. “Whatever the King of Distortion is after, I won’t let anyone stop it!”

We gaped at each other.

“W-wait!” Shiro yelled.

But she just shouted over him. “I hate it here! I wanna go back... I’m going back there!”

There was no getting through to her.

And even if there were, we could hear her footsteps moving away.

“Jesus...” Shiro said, frustrated. He punched the door. “Can’t

believe this happened!”

“Sh-shit...” I said, still reeling. “Are we really locked in here?”
Then the vents behind us slammed shut.

3:00 P.M.

The cold winter rain just would not stop falling.

“Touka...!”

I stood among the craters, staring up at the Moon Temple, unable to bear the tension.

The Moon Temple staff had fled in the chaos, and the only one left nearby was me, Takeda Keiji.

I was absolutely sure Touka was inside the Moon Temple now. She'd turned into him, and was fighting something. There was no doubt in my mind. I wasn't sure if Boogiepop was just delusional or actually going up against things that threatened the world, but based on the conversations we'd had on the school roof, he certainly believed the latter.

The earthquakes had subsided. No more sinkholes appeared. Whatever had caused them, it seemed like it was safe now.

But...

But that uneasy feeling in my stomach wouldn't go away.

I felt like the real danger was only just beginning.

“Shit...!”

I noticed movement behind me. People coming back now that the quakes were over?

“You there! It's dangerous here, move back!” a cop called. I ignored him.

Then...

The spheres that covered the outside of the Moon Temple, bringing light to the inside of it, began to flash.

And a moment later, some speakers somewhere started blaring a strong, stuttering beat, a weird song even by Led Zeppelin standards.

“Wh-what the...?”

I wasn't the only one confused. The song was out of place, yet it

seemed totally appropriate for a street that looked like a monster had just rampaged through it.

Then we heard a voice.

“Gentleman, have you found the cause? No, as long as this music continues, you haven’t yet reached me.”

I didn’t know what to make of this, but one of the Moon Temple staff behind me whispered, “B-boss?”

His boss...?

Then this voice was...

3:03 P.M.

Teratsuki Kyoichi's voice!" I called out, trapped in the darkness.

The song was Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir." An eight-minute song from the middle of the album *Physical Graffiti*. One of their best.

This clinched it.

"He *has* to be the King of Distortion!"

His voice went on. "I don't know how many people there are inside this Moon Temple...but I'm sure they're doing what they can to get out. Oh, for those of you outside, there's no way for you to get in, so don't bother trying."

What an asshole.

"God damn it!"

I was grinding my teeth.

"To those of you inside! I'm sure you heard that sound before 'Kashmir' started. That was the sound of all the vents in the Moon Temple closing. I'm sure you're all smart enough to know what that means."

I gulped, and turned towards the closed vent.

It was sealed tight. No light passing through.

"You're right! When humans breathe, you inhale oxygen, and exhale carbon dioxide. A basic fact... but your supply of oxygen has just been cut off. I don't know for sure how long it'll last you... but if you don't do something soon, the carbon dioxide will rise to poisonous levels."

The fuck?!

Was he insane?!

"I wish you all good health! Do your best!"

And the voice cut out.

"Oh my god! Is he trying to kill all of us?" I yelled.

“Settle down,” Shiro said. “I doubt it’s that simple.”

“B-but...”

“Closing the vents alone isn’t enough to cut off the air flow. That’s just a threat—he’s trying to make us panic.”

“...!”

He had a point.

Even in this tiny room, I could feel the air moving.

“R-right. And panicking doesn’t get us anywhere.”

“Perhaps he’s trying to get us to come to him? If you tell people they’re trapped, where do they usually go?”

“The exit. But those are sealed off, so...”

We both looked at the ceiling.

“Then we go up...?”

“This really is a video game...”

But we were locked in here. How could we escape? How could we get to the top of the building?

“We’ll have to find another exit. Shiro!”

“On it.”

We focused our efforts on combing every inch of the narrow back room.

3:14 P.M.

“...**t**hat was ‘Kashmir.’ But why?”

I, Niitoki Kei, glared at Saotome Masami, the King of Distortion.

“.....”

He did not answer.

“So is that your ultimate goal? Just to kill everyone in the building? That’s it?”

“Is it?”

“Was that announcement something that actually happened? Or are you just trying to trick me again?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know! That’s why I’m asking!”

I was getting annoyed, and my voice was a little too loud.

Where I was standing looked just like the Moon Temple, except for the fact that all the people on the floor appeared to be those mannequin art projects.

But that didn’t change the fact that this was an illusion, a ‘reality’ that fudged the details.

It might be a trap. But it might not be. I had nothing to base my judgment on, no way to calculate the odds.

Argh...!

I wanted everything to fit neatly into place, so this situation was torture for me.

“It isn’t like you to think in circles, President.”

He was making fun of me. I glared at him.

“I know! Thinking won’t get me anywhere. I’m not smart like Suema-san! This isn’t what I do!”

I turned my back on him and walked away.

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere else!”

There had to be something out there.

Somewhere.

Even if this was an illusion, there had to be a hint somewhere that would let me break out of this mess. Or maybe there wasn't. But I couldn't just do nothing. I had to act.

I had no specific goal in mind, but I moved forward purposefully anyway. He followed.

“Looking for something?”

“Yep!”

“Looking for something with Saotome Masami at your side. Just like that day.”

That stopped me in my tracks.

“.....”

“If Tanaka Shiro was here, it would be exactly the same.”

“Is the Manticore gonna attack us?”

“No, but maybe Kirima Nagi will come to save you.”

“I'm not getting my hopes up.”

I started walking again.

For a while we proceeded in silence.

Certainly, if Nagi showed up here, that would be reassuring. But Nagi was only human. If she got cut, she'd bleed, even die. And Echoes wasn't around to share his life energy with her again.

I couldn't and shouldn't count on anyone coming to save me.

I had to look after myself.

But as I thought that, something bugged me.

...mm?

I felt like I'd been thinking this same thing over and over again. I'd never really been one to wait for someone to give me a hand. I'd always looked younger than I was, so I'd spent my whole life with people asking if I needed help, and insisting I could do it myself.

“Oh.”

Suddenly, it came to me.

I got it now.

I stopped in my tracks.

“What is it, President?” the King of Distortion said.

I turned back towards him.

“I figured it out, *Saotome-kun*.”

He frowned.

“Figured what out?”

“What I left with you. The reason why you... why Saotome Masami appeared as my King of Distortion.”

3:34 P.M.

The announcement made it clear the Moon Temple shutdown was a premeditated crime in progress.

“Is Teratsuki Kyoichiro really dead?”

The police were getting serious now, and flooding former MCE staff with questions.

“W-we had a funeral for him!”

“And I’m asking for the truth! Did you verify the body was his?”

“W-we cremated it! But...there’s a death certificate from the hospital somewhere, I’m sure.”

“Where, exactly?”

“Er, um... who was in charge of that, again?”

The staff weren’t able to provide anything definitive.

The riot police were here, trying to force their way into the Moon Temple, but as the announcement had warned with such confidence, they had not been able to open the doors. Normally, they’d just smash in a window, but this building didn’t have any.

“Can we take a helicopter and get in through the roof?”

“Not with this wind and rain. And there’s no heliport.”

“Shit, what else is there?”

What was Teratsuki Kyoichiro trying to accomplish by locking everyone in? Typical reasons like ransom or the release of political prisoners weren’t exactly his MO, and he’d said nothing about either. With his goal unclear, the police couldn’t approach the problem by working the motive.

And the press was catching wind of this, and flooding to the scene.

“What’s going on? Are the hostages safe?”

“How are the police classifying this incident?”

“MCE workers, over here! Talk to us!”

“Who’s responsible, here?”

“Were adequate safety checks done beforehand?”

“People are saying you were slow to respond!”

“Say something!”

Shut up, already!

“What are they doing?” I muttered. I couldn’t see any of this getting us anywhere.

The riot police had the building cordoned off, so I couldn’t get that close to the Moon Temple anymore, but I hadn’t given up yet. Touka was in there, and I had to get her out somehow.

Maybe she didn’t need my help, but I wasn’t gonna let that stop me.

“Damn it, Touka!”

“You called?” a voice said, behind me.

Surprised, I turned around...and Touka was standing there.

“Hunh...?” I gaped at her. “M-Miyashita...why are you here?”

My head was spinning. For Christ’s sake. Had I convinced myself she was in there, when she never was?

But... but was that true?

“I could ask you the same thing, Senpai,” she said, grinning.

“W-well, I...”

“Enough standing around. I say we go inside! To the Moon Temple!”

“Hunh...?”

She smiled at me, and realization dawned.

Touka wasn’t holding an umbrella. Despite the rain. But she wasn’t the least bit wet.

Looking closer, there was a strange lack of light in her eyes.

“Wh-who are you?!”

“You want in so bad, I know just how to get you there, Senpai,” said the thing with Touka’s face.

“Wh-what?”

“Come with me.”

It started walking. I hastily followed.

We went right towards the riot police.

“Um...” I said, certain they’d grab us. But it took my hand and pulled me along.

I’d held Touka’s hand before, any number of times, but for some reason this flustered me.

We went right through the crowd of cops—all of them on high alert, yet not one of them saw us moving past them.

“Wh-what’s going on...?”

“Their reality and ours are slightly out of sync,” it said.

I had no idea what that meant.

We reached the wall of the Moon Temple.

But there was nothing there.

“...? Um, what now?” I said, looking around.

It reached out and touched the wall. And the wall opened up.

“Wh-what the...?”

Magic? I thought, but it explained itself calmly.

“Nothing special. Just an emergency exit. Designed to blend in perfectly with the exterior, the seams hidden in the pattern on the walls.”

“.....” I stared in shock. “It...it wasn’t locked?”

When this whole thing started, all the shutters had slammed down.

“He broke the lock before this started. So this door has been wide open the whole time. But because of the sync issues, nobody noticed.”

“.....”

While I was still processing this, it stepped inside.

I was about to follow when Touka’s head popped back out the door.



“Hey, Senpai.”

“Wh-what?”

“Please...catch me!”

She gave a mischievous wink, and ducked back in.

“W-wait...!”

I stepped in after it, but it was already gone.

I swallowed, and stared into the dimly lit corridors.

It was slanted upwards, like a staircase.

Guess I'm going up.

I made up my mind, and moved into the Moon Temple.

3:53 P.M.

Habara-san, here!” Shiro called.

I ran over to him. He thumped the wall again, and there was a hollow sound.

“Is that...?”

“I think it’s an elevator shaft.”

“Interesting. So there should be a security panel nearby. Narrows down our search radius, at any rate.”

We redoubled our efforts and found the way in soon enough.

We kicked the panel till it gave way.

Peering inside, we found a vertical shaft. What a stroke of luck! If Michimoto Sakiko hadn’t locked us in here, we’d have never found this.

“Bingo!” I said, snapping my fingers.

“Yes!” Shiro said, pumping his fist.

We slipped through the panel and onto the security ladder inside.

Looked to be about 100 meters up. A long climb.

“Didn’t expect to be playing *Crazy Climber* here,” I muttered.

But that was a sign I’d relaxed a little.

“Just you wait, King of Distortion—Teratsuki Kyoichiro! I’m gonna find you, and knock your damn socks off!”

“Let’s hurry!”

We began clambering up the darkened shaft.

4:01 P.M.

Clutching my knees, at a loss, unable to go anywhere, I sat unmoving in the darkness.

I'd locked Tanaka Shiro and what's-his-name in that room, but I didn't really think that was going to accomplish much. They both seemed like the type to get things done if they put their minds to it.

Not me, though. Michimoto Sakiko: hopeless loser.

Try as I might, I'd been unable to get back to that other world. I couldn't bring myself to try and leave the Moon Temple either, so I just sat there sniffing, uselessly.

I was awful.

Just the worst.

A stupid, worthless girl with no reason to live.

I'd heard that broadcast from the King of Distortion or Teratsuki Kyoichiro... I wasn't sure which. That made it clear we didn't have long to live.

And that was for the best, really.

I couldn't speak for everyone here, but I certainly deserved this fate. I was never going to accomplish anything. All I would ever do was what I did to Hinako. Say something awful, hurt someone, and then never see them again.

I was better off not doing anything.

Never talking to anyone, never making any friends, never letting anyone get close!

If that meant I was better off dead, then let me die!

"I've had enough..." I sobbed. "I can't do this anymore. I don't care what happens."

I sounded like a lost child.

The Moon Temple creaked. It kept doing that. Fragments fell from the ceiling. This place felt ready to collapse on top of me.

But I didn't move.

I didn't know what to do!

"Unhh...waahhhh...!"

I couldn't bear it, and a sob forced its way out of me.

Then...

Screee...

A strained, metallic sound, not like the sounds before it.

I looked up.

And saw a shadow standing down the hall, right where a pillar connected the floor to the ceiling.

"....."

I stared at the shadow, blankly.

The shadow was tying some sort of wire to the pillar. Making bridges between that pillar and the others. The metallic sound had been the wire scraping against the walls.

Working in silence, the silhouette's oversized hat and cape made it look less like a person and more like a pipe.

"....."

I gaped until it finished what it was doing, and muttered, "Well. That should hold for about a week."

I scrambled to my feet.

"Er...um...!"

The shadow turned towards me.

"What?" it asked. I couldn't tell by the voice if it was a boy or a girl.

I was scared. My lips were trembling. But I forced myself to move closer.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Reinforcing the building. Just making life harder for the demolition crew."

The shadow narrowed one eye, and turned up the opposite corner of its lips, making a strange, asymmetrical expression. Was it smiling?

Playing dumb? Mocking me? I couldn't be sure.

"Um, well... are... are you...?"

I hesitated.

The shadow shrugged.

"Yes. My name is Boogiepop. It seems you know me."

It said this so simply I didn't know how to react.

"Th-the real one?"

"Well now. Is there anything in this world that actually counts as real?"

I didn't know what that was supposed to mean. Blood was rushing to my head.

"No, that's not what I... I mean, if, um, you're real, then..."

No use. I couldn't make myself make sense. I couldn't get to the point.

But the shadow jumped ahead of me.

"Do I kill people? Yes, I do."

My jaw dropped.

Boogiepop said it so simply, as if saying, "So what?" As if saying the most ordinary thing in the world. How could anyone say it like that?

"Y-you make it sound so easy..."

"You've heard rumors about me, I assume?"

"Er... they say you're a shinigami."

"And shinigami kill people. Nothing easy or hard about it."

"....."

None of this was what I expected.

I thought... I thought Boogiepop would be like... more grim?

And there was something I needed to ask. As rattled as I was, the need was so urgent I found my lips moving on their own, the words pouring out.

And Boogiepop answered calmly, as if this happened all the time.

“You’re a killer?”

“I may have been called that.”

“Do people hire you?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“What do you get for killing?”

“Nothing at all.”

“So you work for free?”

“I’ve certainly never received any rewards.”

“So why do you kill?”

“First...because it’s my job. And secondly, because the people I kill are enemies of the world.”

“How do you choose who to kill?”

“I don’t choose at all. Most times I find the one I need to kill automatically appears in front of me.”

“Do they want you to kill them? Are they lining up for it?”

“Nobody really wants to be killed.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.” It seemed oddly certain.

I stuck to my guns. “Oh, yeah? I feel like there have to be people so sick of living they start seriously thinking about being killed.”

“No such thing.”

“There is!”

“That is simply because if they continue to live, they’ll be choosing to allow whatever meaning their life has had so far to die. A will to live, the idea of continuing to exist, is inherent in the concept. They have not actually rejected that at all.”

I was totally lost now.

“...? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You only have the right to say you wish to die if you have truly lived with everything you’ve got.”

It shrugged.

“...!” I gasped. “Wh-what’s your point?”

“Do you have that right?” it asked. Pointedly.

“I... I, well...” I stammered. “I’m an awful person. I’m worthless.”

“And that justifies killing?”

“I-It doesn’t?”

“If it did, most people in the world would have to die. By your logic,” it said. “You don’t think this world is a *good* one, do you?”

I certainly didn’t know how to handle a shinigami telling me *that*.

“But if all the bad people were gone, wouldn’t that make the world a better place?”

“A world with only the good people left?”

“Y-yes. People like me gone, and people like Hina-chan get to go on living in peace.”

“Hina-chan? Who is that?”

“Oh...she’s a much, much better girl than me. And yet... why am I the one who...”

My voice shook. I couldn’t bear it. I hung my head.

“Hmm,” Boogiepop said. “So Hina-chan was your King of Distortion.”

The moment it said that name, my eyes widened.

Right. How did I not realize?

Why else would Boogiepop be here for?

This shinigami... the King of Distortion... were they...

“Are you...the same? You and him?”

“.....”

Boogiepop didn’t answer.

If... if that was true... then was this some sort of turf war?

Which meant that for me, well, I couldn’t ever be Hinako’s enemy, could I? So this shinigami was...

As I muttered under my breath, Boogiepop spoke, quietly.

“Was your King of Distortion nice to you?”

I nodded.

She'd been very nice.

I'd rather be dead than betray that. Maybe I didn't have the right to be killed but that didn't matter.

I was glaring at Boogiepop, who met my gaze and held it.

"What did she say to you?"

"That I had to turn my suffering into gold."

"And that seemed 'nice'?"

"It did!" I yelled. "I didn't know what it meant! I just thought, wow, deep, guess I'd better try! If Hina-chan is alive there, then I'll do whatever she asks!"

Tears were streaming down my cheeks.

"Do you still think you can?"

"I don't know! I'm not *there* anymore!"

What should I do?

How could I do what the King of Distortion asked?

Should I fight Boogiepop? Would that help protect Hinako?

I didn't think I could ever beat this thing. But...still...

"Your King of Distortion is a part of you," Boogiepop said, interrupting my thoughts. "If it was nice to you, then that is because you are nice. The King of Distortion is like me—just like you said. I doubt it has a will of its own. It simply gave shape to your distortion. Which means you have been distorting your own kindness."

"....."

I didn't know what this meant. Boogiepop kept talking.

"That couldn't have been much fun. The distortion must have made you suffer. But you are as kind as you have suffered. Hina-chan appeared to tell you that. You care about her?"

Boogiepop spoke as if she was still alive. I nodded.

"You love her?"

I nodded.

Boogiepop looked confused.

"Then...haven't you already succeeded?"

“Hunh?”

“If these feelings don’t count as ‘gold’ then what in this world does?”

Good question.

“...!”

My jaw dropped again.

Then we heard a dull thudding noise from up above us, in the elevator shaft, like someone beating a hammer against the wall.

“My, my...” Boogiepop said, shaking its head. “I supposed this won’t end that easily.”

It turned and ran off.

“W-wait!” I cried.

I tried to follow, but the shadow was too fast, and before I knew it I’d lost sight of it.

4:22 P.M.

We found a toolbox on the tiny landing at the top of the elevator shaft, and used it to pry the doors open.

“I’m in!”

“Keep your hands still!”

Shiro hit the crowbar with a hammer, and each blow forced the door further open. At last there was a clunk, and the door stopped fighting us. I guess the lock came off?

“Cool!”

We stepped through.

It was pitch black, with not even the dim light of an exit sign to illuminate our path.

I did a quick scan with my penlight. This was definitely not the top floor. The top was an open space with piles of pamphlets, while this had a low ceiling and felt cramped.

And there were rows of tube-like things everywhere.

Everything fell into place in my mind when I saw them.

“I see... that’s why he filled the lower areas with all those bad art projects,” I said.

“Oh!” Shiro said. “Camouflage?”

“You want to hide some weird shit, hide it with a bunch of other weird shit. The crew working on this building just assumed these were the same as that mannequin art, and brought them here without questioning it at all.”

“So these tubes are definitely...”

“Gas canisters. He called them junk art and tricked everyone.”

Hundreds of them, enough to fill the entire building.

“This is insane. He planned all of this?” Shiro sighed.

I felt the same way.

The rows of gas canisters looked like rows of mortar shells in an armory. This was an armory, and these were his weapons.

Shuddering, I swallowed hard.

“Oh, is this...?” Shiro muttered. Abruptly the room filled with a pale purple light.

Surprised, I turned around, and found him pointing at a switch on the wall.

“I pushed this, and the lights turned on.”

“So the backup power only works here?”

I turned off the penlight.

Didn’t seem to be anyone here.

We began poking around. We were 150 meters up, but this place sure looked like a basement.

“Make your way to the top of the tower, and find yourself in a dungeon. Defies all the rules of RPGs. Teratsuki Kyoichiro may have been a great CEO, but he wasn’t much of a game designer,” I said, hoping the joke would fight back the fear rising inside me.

Shiro snorted. “You can say that again!”

He seemed to be enjoying this. *Dude has balls*, I thought.

“Hey, Shiro.”

“What?”

“About, um... that girl who was in love with you.”

“Mm...”

“She had good taste. I can see why the age difference wouldn’t have mattered to her.”

“You think?”

“I do,” I nodded with conviction.

Because of her, Shiro had come here. And given me a partner I could trust.

Thanks, lady. You did me a real favor.

At the back of the room, we found a door.

There was a plate on it that read, “Chairman’s Office.”

“Here!”

“Looks like we finally made it.”

Both of us hesitated, glanced at each other, and nodded.

Each of us stood to one side of the door.

Shiro reached out and knocked.

No response.

I steeled my nerves, and grabbed the knob.

“...!”

It wasn't locked. I turned the knob and pushed the door gently inwards.

I let go, and the door swung slowly open.

A burst of cold air came rushing out.

“...?!”

“Is this...air conditioning?”

We sniffed the cold air, and looked at each other.

“If they're keeping it cold?”

“Then...computers?”

We stepped into the room.

Inside were rows of supercomputers, and the audible hum made it clear they were functioning.

It was like standing inside Stonehenge. The chill in the air made me feel like I was placing a flag on the northernmost point on the continent.

There was nobody here.

Each time I breathed out, a cloud formed. It was colder in here than it was outside. In February.

“Is this controlling all of the Moon Temple?” Shiro asked.

I shook my head. “If that was all it was doing, they wouldn't need anything this massive. This room has to be processing the entire information load for a certain...system. Enough data to conduct information warfare on an entire country.”

“So...?”

“Let’s see if we can get anything to show on a screen.”

There was a single desktop placed almost apologetically in a corner, and I turned that on.

It booted up like normal, nothing out of the ordinary about it. I tried connecting it to other lines.

Immediately, words appeared on the screen.

“Open if you dare.”

Below that, an image of a box was flashing.

“...?”

“I...guess we should open it?” Shiro said, leaning closer.

I didn’t know what else to do.

I clicked the “Activate” button above the box.

And the screen cut out.

“...?!”

We panicked, but a moment later the screen filled with static, which in turn resolved into a single image.

A man, sitting on a chair in a dimly lit room, facing us. It was Teratsuki Kyoichiro. But there was something strange about him.

This Teratsuki Kyoichiro was much younger than he’d looked in magazines or on TV.

“Well done! You, and your companions—if you have any, I have no way of knowing—deserve praise for making it this far.

“Oh, my face? Yes, I don’t blame you. I used a great deal of makeup in my public appearances, but this is what I actually looked like. In my line of work, being of a certain age gives you that extra tinge of authority. Ha ha, putting all that makeup on every day was a real nightmare! I doubt even famous actresses cake it on like I do. Even with the makeup, people accused me of looking young, or not looking my age. I suppose I just never had the knack for it!

“Although I suppose that’s not the answer you’re really looking for, I know. The Moon Temple, right? As you may have guessed, all of this was created just to bring you here. Or at least, it will be. As I’m recording this, the building is not yet complete, which complicates things. How’d it turn out? I hoped to create something that would loom over the city, dominating the skyline, and yet remaining completely out of place. Did I succeed? If everyone thought, ‘What a weird building,’ then I did.”

The man smiled. He locked his fingers together on his knees.

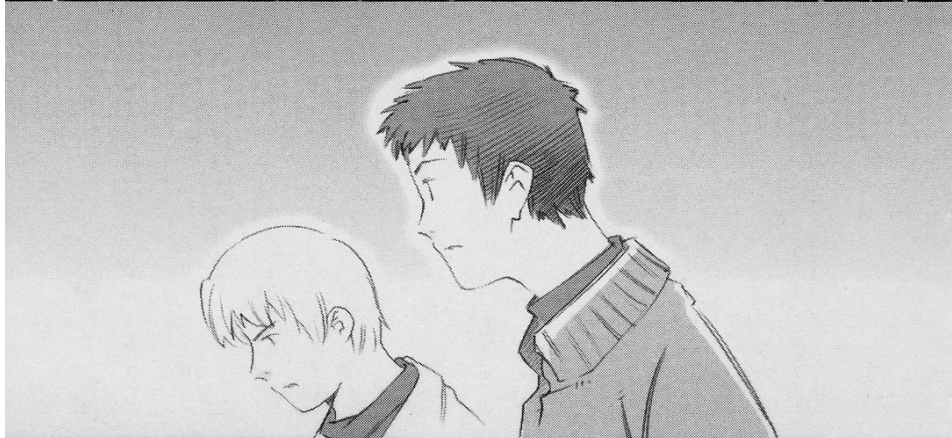
“Right, right, I have so much to explain. But, like I said, things are complicated. Perhaps I just sound like I’m beating around the bush, but bear with me, please.

“Have you ever considered whether the world has a ‘flow’ to it? You can call it destiny, or perhaps a ‘trend’. Have you ever really thought about it? Thinking about it didn’t get you anywhere, did it? Ha ha, I suppose not. But this is a problem mankind has thought about since we first arrived in this world. A problem we still ponder today. And there are parts of it we’ve come to understand. After all, it’s been quite a while since we came up with the concept of ‘evolution’.”

The man looked up at the ceiling, and sighed.

“Yes...that isn’t something that can be explained with mere probability. No matter how you look at it, there must have been some direction, some flow to it. I can only think of how giraffes’ necks must have suddenly become incredibly long, and how whales abruptly became so ludicrously huge. These changes took place far too fast for these to have been minor chance mutations that slowly proliferated. Each replaced what came before quite quickly. When they didn’t replace their predecessors, things were even more extreme. The new and the old were so different they didn’t even try to kill each other off, just divided their territory up. Like humans and monkeys. And this line of thought

naturally leads us to wonder if this flow is still going. And if so, then what comes next? Perhaps we can't know for sure, but can we at least get a read on which direction the flow is going in?"



“Maybe that’s something only God can know? Not one powerful man in all of human history has ever resisted the impulse to meddle in God’s domain. But in our modern age, it is harder to tell who is in charge, who holds the real power. Instead, we have a system. A system with no real name. For convenience, we call it the Towa Organization. I belong to it, and I was created by it.

“Yes, I am a man-made man. I am less a human being and more of a robot made from biological parts. And my purpose was to manipulate the economy to the Towa Organization’s benefit. Yes... ‘was’. Past tense. My role has ended. Of course it has. My power grew a bit too great, you see. I’ll be disposed of soon. I predicted this, but I’m afraid the economy wouldn’t let me tone things down that easily. Once you realize you’ve grown too big, there’s little you can do to stop it. So I decided to make one last big gamble. To take a huge amount of money, and play a game with the Towa Organization. The construction of the Moon Temple.

“After my death, I’m sure the Moon Temple will be turned into an exhibit. That’s the only way for them to turn any short-term profit from it, after all. Is that what brought you here? Or are you from the event management team? Either way, I doubt you expected to get mixed up in anything like this. But here you are. As you should be. Things like this happen. That isn’t proven, there’s no evidence to support that notion, but I believe there are people who know things they should not, and who go where they must go. And those people are what the Towa Organization is hunting. The Towa Organization has laid traps the world over to draw those people to it. And this Moon Temple is one of those. The only one of its scale, of course, and one created without the permission of Axis.

“You were locked in here, and lost consciousness. But fear not, the sleeping gas used is quite weak. You were not harmed by it. What matters is that you woke up first, and made your way here. You know what that means, don’t you? You have powers beyond ‘coincidence’—certainly enough that the Towa Organization would want to keep tabs on you. You have the potential to be the Towa Organization’s enemies.

“I wanted to let you know. The Moon Temple and all Teratsuki Kyoichiro’s fortune existed for no other reason than to tell you to be careful. The supercomputers around you are busy distracting the entire internet, making it so no one can ever find this message. I can only hope they succeeded.

“The code to unlock the Moon Temple’s current state is “STAIRWAY 2 HEAVEN”. This will open every lock. Type it into the keyboard before you, and as you do, this record will be deleted.

“You have potential. I cannot imagine what kind. Perhaps you are not yet aware of it yourselves. But I would prefer that you not waste it. Becoming the enemy of the Towa Organization is secondary. What really matters here is how you grow that potential, and how you make use of it. I wish you well.”

The image changed. The man’s eyes looked away from the camera, to one side. Speaking to someone who’d entered the room. As he spoke, he reached down and pressed a button on the side of his chair.

“Oh, they sent you, Eugene? I’m sure you’ll do a fine—”

The image cut out, replaced by static.

“.....”

I found myself remembering the first time I ever met Nagi. Wondering if the trap I’d set off that day was part of the ‘distraction,’ the jamming program he’d set up here.

But that didn’t matter. This was way beyond that.

The video started over again, playing on repeat.

“Well done! You, and your companions—if you have any, I have no way of knowing—”

I watched it again, dazed.

But Shiro nodded to himself.

“Well, that explains a lot...”

“W-wait, Shiro, this isn’t right... it’s...”

“How so?”

“B-but... but this is... how is...?”

My voice was shaking. Pathetic.

The video just kept going. “Right, right, I have so much to explain. But, like I said, things are complicated. Perhaps I just sound like I’m beating around the bush, but bear with me, please.”

The same thing as before.

“Why... why doesn’t he say one word about the King of Distortion?!”

He didn’t explain that at all!

He only mentioned us being trapped in here and put to sleep!

“.....”

“He didn’t cover the most important part! What the hell?!” I yelled.

And then... the Teratsuki Kyoichiro on the screen changed. He stopped talking, and grinned.

“Don’t you get it?” he said.

“Hunh?”

“Do you really not know why?”

The light in his eyes was gone.

“...?!”

And “Custard Pie” echoed through the air...

Dahhdadadan, dan da-dan...

Pounding in my ears.

And a second later I was standing all alone in the center of a sunlit

field.

“N-no?!”

A wave of heat struck me, and before I knew it I was drenched in sweat.

“God damn it!”

Sitting in front of me, just as he had been in the video, chair and all, was Teratsuki Kyoichiro.

“It’s simple. Very simple,” he said, and chuckled to himself. “How could that video have explained me? After all, he only provided the ‘opportunity.’”

“S-so you—the King of Distortion isn’t part of...?”

“Think of this as a ‘collaboration’. Between myself, and the man whose face I wear. I owe him a great deal for creating such an ideal stage for me. Bravo!”

I shuddered.

Had I been dancing on his palm this whole time?

But...

But I wasn’t out of options, yet.

I glared at the King of Distortion.

He was the same distance away as he’d seemed when I was looking at him on the monitor. This might be an illusion, but in the real world I was still sitting in front of the monitor. It sure felt like I was standing up, but that was just *here*. Which meant my fingers were still...

“.....”

I closed my eyes. Seeing anything would just confuse me. I let my mind go blank, not thinking anything. Telling myself I couldn’t hear “Custard Pie” playing in my ear.

My fingers were still resting on the keyboard, and they should still be resting on the right keys. Obviously, I could touch type. I could type whatever I wanted by reflex, without consciously thinking about it.

I could do this.

I was sure of it.

I *had* to do this!

I'd been typing for years. It was effortless. I could pull this off!
I swallowed hard. And tried to punch in the code we'd just heard.
But as I did, someone grabbed my arm, and twisted it back.

"I'm afraid we can't have anyone opening the Moon Temple just yet," he said, quietly.

I gaped at him.

It was Tanaka Shiro.

But this Shiro... his eyes were...

"Sh-Shiro, your eyes..."

"....."

"Your eyes...if you're in *here*, how is there light in your eyes?"

The King of Distortion had no light in his eyes. Most likely because he was a shadow, a reflection of other things. Shadows had no light of their own. And if there was something in that shadow that had light, that must be...

Shiro wasn't letting go of my arm.

He spoke calmly, solemnly, with all the weight his name implied.

"Yes. I'm the *real* King of Distortion."

4:41 P.M.

As I climbed the giant staircase, I was struggling to remember.

“Oh...?” Saotome Masami said. Or at least, the King of Distortion, wearing his face. He raised an eyebrow. “So you figured it out, President?”

“Yes,” I said, glaring back at him. “I really should have noticed the moment you appeared, in that place, at that time. I mean, that’s when you said the thing that stuck with me.”

Everything around us was quiet.

The things on the floor, shaped like people, spoke no words. That stupid “Custard Pie” song had finally stopped blaring, too.

“Something Saotome Masami said?”

“That’s right. Just an off-handed comment. It went in one ear and out the other and I’d completely forgotten it until now. But—if we go with your way of thinking, that may well be because I wanted that to not be true, because I was trying to preserve my idea of who he was. Maybe I intentionally tried to forget about it.”

“I see,” The King of Distortion nodded. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this, and it’s very consistent. So far. But what, specifically, did he say?”

“You said, ‘Do you know how good that feels?’ Right after you’d killed Kirima Nagi. I didn’t want to understand, and I said as much. And when I challenged you, you said *it*.”

“Beautiful, president. I love your eyes. I love strong-willed, powerful eyes.”

I looked right at Saotome Masami's face.

"I've never gone out with a guy. I don't hate boys or anything. I just haven't had the opportunity. So... so in a way, you were my first. The first to ever say anything like that to me. You were the first to say anything in the ballpark of 'You're cute!' 'I love you!' Anything like that."

"....."

"But your version was sickening. Given what you were up to, there was no way I could happily accept that. So I did my best not to think about it. But, deep down, I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That you meant it. That you weren't just mocking me. In that moment, you were definitely in love with me. But to me, that was just terrifying."

I sighed.

"I never wanted to know how unsettling love could be. But..."

I looked up.

"But that's the truth. I accept that your feelings were real, and I reject them completely."

This man with Saotome Masami's face glared at me.

But then he shrugged, and smiled.

"Are you talking about your own feelings? About your own feelings for Takeda Keiji?"

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "But...I don't want to run from it any more. I want to be able to smile at Miyashita Touka when I run into her."

Boogiepop had talked about us like we were the same.

Miyashita-san was no different from me. So I didn't need to be ashamed of my feelings. But I did have to accept the pain that came with not having them reciprocated.

"You don't know?"

"Not now. Not yet. I don't have the perspective yet. It still hurts too much."

"That's honest."

“Well, sure,” I smirked. “I am the Discipline Committee President.”

He grinned back. “Well done, Niitoki Kei. Saotome Masami was all kinds of wrong, but in this one thing, he may have been right. Right to have a high opinion of you.”

“...mm?”

I wasn’t a fan of that idea. Of putting it like that.

“Don’t say that with his face. You’re borrowing his appearance! You shouldn’t say bad things about him!”

He burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! I mean it! You’re something else!”

And he began to fade away, leaving...

Leaving me climbing the Moon Temple.

The people around me were no longer art projects. Of course not; they were real now.

There must be something up above. That “Kashmir” announcement had basically been telling us to go up, so I went up.

But I was already struggling to remember.

I was sure I’d faced the King of Distortion, and said something to him, and as a result, I’d returned to the real world, but what exactly had happened? I was no longer sure.

Whatever.

It hardly mattered now. Even if the air supply thing was a bluff, I wasn’t about to stay trapped in this place one second longer.

At last I reached the top, an open area all dressed up for the event. But there wasn’t really anything here.

“.....?”

I looked around. There had to be something. There couldn’t just be...nothing.

“I’ll find it...!” I said, trying to beat back fear.

“Niitoki Kei. You again?” said someone behind me.

I let out a little shriek, and spun around.

It was Boogiepop, of course.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing here? N-never mind, I already know. Argh.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

He was so bad for the heart.

“What brings you here?” Boogiepop asked. “You climbed up here for a reason, I assume?”

“N-not a good one,” I said, flushing.

Boogiepop shook his head.

“I thought not. This is you, after all.”

“That’s just mean!” I snapped. But then I saw a dark line running along the edge of Boogiepop’s bangs.

Blood.

“...! Are you hurt?”

“It’s just a scratch. The bleeding has already stopped.”

I had to think about this one. Had he been fighting?

“A-are you sure you’re okay?” I asked.

He ignored the question, electing instead to stare silently at the ceiling.

“There’s more above us.”

“Hmm? Like, a hidden room?”

“So it seems.”

Boogiepop stalked over to a display case, and hopped up on it. Then he knocked on the ceiling.

“Definitely. It’s hollow.”

“I-Is that where the King of Distortion is?” I asked, clutching my fists to my chest.

“Hard to say. Probably best not to expect a dramatic arrival.”

Boogiepop moved around on top of the display, inspecting the ceiling.

“Here,” he said.

His arm snapped back, and before I could wonder what he’d done, there was a grinding sound, and something fell from the ceiling.

A folding staircase.

“Seems to be an emergency exit. Probably not something in Teratsuki’s design; I imagine it was added by someone after the place was built.”

“W-wow!” I said, getting excited. “Now we can move forward!”

Boogiepop sighed dramatically.

“So you’re coming, then?” he asked.

“Of course!” I said, nodding vigorously.

When we emerged above, we found ice cold air rushing past us.

“Wh-what the heck? Is this a fridge?”

“Well, a cooling system. Must be something generating heat.”

“Like a computer? Or a server farm?”

“Perhaps. Either way, seems unrelated to our problems.”

“Hmm...”

Boogiepop was looking the other way, so I followed his gaze.

There was a boy standing there.

“Oh! T-Tanaka-kun?!” I cried.

This was my kouhai, Tanaka Shiro-kun. He’d been on my side in the incident the King of Distortion and I had discussed.

“.....”

He stared at us in silence.

“A-are you the real one? We’re not back in that illusion, are we?” I said.

“I see,” Boogiepop said, softly. “So that’s how you know me? We fought on the same side once. Naturally you remember, King of Distortion.”

...uh.

My mouth dropped. What? What did he just say?

“.....”

Takana-kun did not respond. He just stood perfectly still, watching us with eagle eyes.

“Wh-what? What are you talking about?”

I looked from one to the other, unable to grasp the situation.

Both were clearly very serious. Deadly serious.

“What’s going on...?!”

“Niitoki-senpai,” Tanaka-kun said. “You should know by now.”

“Hunh?”

“You’ve already made it through. You should know this is necessary. Every heart has distortions, and those must be addressed.”

“.....”

I gaped at him. I didn’t know exactly what he meant by this, but what I did know was that Tanaka-kun was the real deal.

The real King of Distortion had finally shown himself.

“B-but...but Tanaka-kun...”

“I’m not hurting anyone. They’re already hurt. I’m helping them see that pain. All I’m doing is showing the source of their pain to them. I’m not controlling anyone. I’ve no intention of trying to spread my influence like that.”

“T-Tanaka-kun...”

“This is nothing but an experiment. How can we ease the distortions in the hearts of man? And do so without force, but entirely of their own free will? I’m just trying to see if that’s possible. With all these people here, unconscious—it’s the ideal situation. If I tried this in the middle of a normal street, it would cause all kinds of accidents. But in the Moon Temple, with everyone already asleep, I’m not hurting anyone.”

“Tanaka-kun...”

I didn’t know what to say to him. But this was reality. Unlike those illusions, the scene couldn’t change at a whim.

“You’re ‘showing’ them?” Boogiepop muttered. “That is your power, then, King of Distortion? What should we call you? The ability to bring hidden distortions to light—to harmonize with people’s minds,

and expand a portion of those minds. Hundreds of minds at once. For a sudden manifestation, the scale is unprecedented.”

Sudden...? What did that mean?

“I’m right, aren’t I? King of Distortion, you only emerged from Tanaka Shiro recently. You’ve only just been born. Perhaps even after Tanaka Shiro arrived at the Moon Temple this morning.”

“.....”

“That’s why your control is still sloppy enough to allow Zoragi to manifest. That was rather dangerous, you know. Did you learn any lessons there?”

“.....”

“What about Tanaka Shiro led to your birth? Are you aware of it yourself?”

“Yes, I am,” Tanaka-kun—the King of Distortion said. “Tanaka Shiro has a deep-seated guilt. Guilt because he never once understood what she was thinking.”

I gasped.

Did he mean Naoko-san? A victim of the previous incident. She’d been in love with Tanaka-kun, but he’d had no idea how to respond to that.

“That guilt called me forth. His desire to respond to her affection took this form, created this ability. She often told Tanaka Shiro he was meant for bigger things. And indeed he was.”

“I see.”

“Inexperienced or not, I can’t turn back here. That would mean betraying her wish. No matter how long this road I’m on will take.”

“I admire your gumption, at the least.”

“Well, Boogiepop? Must we fight?”

“.....”

Now it was Boogiepop’s turn to fall quiet.

But...

I’d heard about this. According to all the legends, once Boogiepop set his sights on someone, he would show them no mercy. Even if they were a girl.

“Unh...”

I was freezing, but there was a cold sweat running down my back.

I knew the King of Distortion could throw people’s minds into another world. But would that power work on Boogiepop?

And, like the legends said, Boogiepop was a killer.

If these two clashed, it was clear one of them wasn’t coming back.

“S-stop!” I said, stepping between them.

“Senpai...”

“Niitoki Kei, are you...”

I cut them both off.

“I said, stop!” I demanded, loudly. “Tanaka-kun... King of Distortion. Something about all this isn’t adding up. Something you said isn’t right.”

I glared at him, and he frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“You know! Naoko-san died. That’s super sad! I know that you suffered because of it. But what happened to that suffering? You keep talking about turning pain into gold, but what about Tanaka Shiro-kun’s pain?”

I paused for breath.

The King of Distortion frowned.

“Well...he...”

“I should know. Like you said, I ‘made it through’. Tanaka-kun, did you love Naoko-san? Did you have feelings for her?”

“.....”

“You didn’t, did you? You never felt that strongly about her. Not even now that she’s dead. Naoko-san was in love with you, and you had no idea what to think of her, and before you could figure it out she was gone. If you’d stayed together maybe you would have fallen in love with her eventually. Maybe you wouldn’t. But you never figured out which, and that created all *this*, but that...”

I took a deep breath, and finished.

“That’s *your* distortion, King of Distortion. So I have only one thing

to say to you. Fix your own shit before you worry about everyone else. Got it?"

My voice was hoarse by the end, but I'd said my piece.

"....."

The King of Distortion said nothing.

But Boogiepop whispered...

"Once, there was a boy.

"The boy himself did nothing wrong. He was just an ordinary human.

"But he was an enemy of the world.

"Why? Because he had a deep-seated loathing of life, one even he was unaware of. If he had gone on living, if nothing had happened... maybe he would have led a normal life.

"But by a quirk of fate, he met a man-eater, and came to know himself.

"He became a man-eater, too.

"The monster killed simply to survive, but he killed without any real reason. He had no idea when to end it.

"If he still lived, he would have sought out a point of no return, and destroyed the world.

"And there was also a girl.

"She could see people's deaths.

"This was not an impressive power. If she'd become a doctor or an emergency worker, perhaps it would have been of some use to her.

"But she saw those 'deaths' as absolute.

"The idea of taking those deaths from people, gathering them together, and creating something larger possessed her.

"She thought it would help break past the limitations of mankind.

"Soon, she found herself in a position where she did not need to live, as long as she could get closer to what she aspired to. She had become an enemy of the world.

"She was planning to change the hearts of man so they would not

fear death.

“Both of them became my enemies. I’m afraid there was no other path for either of them. All I could do was cut them off before they went any farther down those roads.”

Boogiepop’s sudden monologue, one that seemed to have no bearing on our current situation, caught me off guard. What was his point?

The King of Distortion looked puzzled, too. Like he had no more idea than I did what Boogiepop was trying to say.

But Boogiepop went on.

“There are those who have but one way forward, no other place or future available to them. Whether that absence of options is a blessing or a curse...I could not say. Perhaps it never mattered to them. Perhaps they are simply a particular possibility made manifest, an abstract concept with no free will borne unto this world. Much like myself. Yet...”

Boogiepop turned and looked right at the King of Distortion.

“Yet, is that you?”

The King of Distortion looked uncertain. “What do you mean?”

“You said, ‘no matter how long’ your path takes. That spoke volumes about your resolve. No matter what tries to stop you, you’re prepared to adapt to it, to handle the situation.”

Boogiepop took a step closer to him.

“...!”

Instantly, the King of Distortion’s glare turned toward me, and Boogiepop and I were standing on the edge of a sheer cliff, a straight drop away to nothing.

We’d been flung into another world.

“Wah...?!” I yelled, and took a step backwards. But Boogiepop remained perched on that edge.

The King of Distortion stood across the chasm on the other side.

It was night, and stars glittered in the sky above.

“I’m sure you know this, but if you’re injured here, your body in the real world is injured, too. If you fall, even you will not survive,” the King of Distortion said.

Boogiepop’s expression didn’t change.

He continued with his speech.

“Your adaptability shows both the depth of your conviction, and at the same time, that some uncertainty exists. Nothing in this world exists without some uncertainty. If one without uncertainty existed, that would be someone who had given up hope. And that is not you.”

Boogiepop’s hand moved quickly, and then he took a step forward, off the cliff...onto nothing.

I was sure he was going to fall, but his body dipped slightly, and then stayed put.

There were wires, stretching from one cliff to the other. Under his feet.

The King of Distortion tensed. But he seemed more concerned with Boogiepop’s speech.

“What’s your point?”

“This experiment—do you really have no intention of ending it? I know you don’t think this is your only chance at success, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then you’re just being stubborn. If you stopped for now, you wouldn’t actually mind that much.”

The King of Distortion thought about this.

“P...perhaps not.”

“You see, you have approached me from the start as if I was a threat, an enemy. Why would you think that?”

“Hunh?”

“Why did you convince yourself I was? You could have tried to persuade me to join you. Why did that idea never occur to you?”

The King of Distortion blinked at him.

I was just as surprised. What was he even saying?

“You...aren’t an enemy?”

“To be more accurate,” Boogiepop said. “Why is it you think you’re ‘evil’? Is what you’re doing all that bad? You yourself said you aren’t trying to hurt anyone. Were you the one who locked everyone in here? Who put them to sleep? That wasn’t you. So why assume you would have enemies?”

“.....”

“Was the pain so great? Was Tanaka Shiro that convinced he was a bad guy? Then no matter how you look at it, I’m not the one you should be fighting.”

He spoke calmly, but each word hit home like a knife to the gut.

“.....”

The King of Distortion was silenced, unable to respond.

Boogiepop stayed floating in the air, making no effort to get closer.





And all I could do was stand there, waiting to see how this played out. A helpless observer. That's all I could see myself as. But...

"....."

I was sitting on the ground with my mouth hanging open.

The King of Distortion turned to me. "Niitoki-senpai," he said.

"Y-yes?" I said, sounding like a total idiot.

"What do you think?"

"Hunh?"

"Do you think she bore a grudge against Tanaka Shiro? You were her friend, you should know. Would she have done that?"

"W-well..." I hesitated. But before I knew it, the words came tumbling out. "I have no way of knowing that. But...but Naoko-san always said..."

"Kei! Guess what?! I'm in love!"

"Like there was nothing that gave her more pleasure. Like she was having so much fun. I was always a little jealous of that. I don't think she ever felt any fear about being in love, never felt guilty for having those feelings. She would definitely never have used that as a reason to hurt anyone else. I believe that to be true, anyway. That's all I can say for sure."

"....."

I finished, but the King of Distortion said nothing in reply.

At long last, he gave a sad little smile.

Then he held up his hand in front of his face.

For a moment, the hand clamped down around his face, and then his entire body crumpled to the ground.

"Ah...!"

I jumped forward to catch him. Whoops. The cliffs! But they were already gone, and we were back in the Moon Temple. So I just ran over to him like normal.

"A-are you okay?"

"Um...the code..." he groaned. Weakened, but there was a

strength under it that made me gasp.

“T-Tanaka-kun? Is that actually you?”

He was back. He’d beaten the King of Distortion.

“Senpai, see that keyboard? Habara-san found the code...”

He told me a series of letters with a number in the middle. I was always good at remembering that stuff. He didn’t need to tell me twice.

“Got it!” I said.

I ran across the room to the computer in the corner. There was a boy sitting in the chair, unconscious. This must be Habara-san. I pushed him out of the way and sat down in front of the keyboard. There was some strange man chattering on-screen, but I ignored that.

I took a quick breath, glared down at the keyboard, and typed “STAIRWAY 2 HEAVEN”.

There was a hiss behind me.

I turned around and sparks were shooting out of the giant box-like computers. Smoke, too.

There was a whirr, and the air around us began to move.

“The ventilation’s working again!” I said, relieved.

There was a series of clangs, and the shutters on the windows lining the walls of this hidden room opened.

Outside, the rainclouds had cleared away, revealing a beautiful sunset that bathed the room in deep red light.

“Wow...!” I said.

Beside me, the screen changed, and a list appeared with the instructions, “Choose a song.”

“...?”

I didn’t get it, but I saw one piece on there that I just had to pick.

“What else could I choose, Boogie—”

I turned as I spoke.

But there was no sign of the cloaked figure.

5:00 P.M.

Hunh? What's this music? What a racket!" Hashizaka Shizuka said, lifting her head up off the bar's counter.

"Something Teratsuki Kyoichiro set up, I believe. A wake-up call, as it were," the man next to her said.

"This isn't Led Zeppelin, though...classical music?"

"*His* theme. Hardly the piece to play as the curtains close, but oh well. His taste is what it is."

The man laughed softly.

"Curtains?" Shizuka frowned. "You mean this is all ending?"

"Yes. I'm afraid this is good-bye. All distortions will return from whence they came, as they should."

"I...see," Shizuka stared at her hands.

"I can't ever be Makoto-kun's father. That's a burden you'll just have to bear."

"No, I know that. That doesn't matter anymore. That's not what matters." Shizuka looked up at him. "It's just a shame. I was having so much fun."

"Well, if you enjoyed it, that's what really matters," the man smiled.

"I did! It was a blast. You were far nicer than the real Teratsuki Kyoichiro-san ever was. I was able to tell you everything I was never able to tell him, and it feels like a real weight off my chest. Even if this is good-bye, I won't ever forget you."

Shizuka meant every word, but the man just shook his head.

"No, you won't remember this." He seemed certain.

"I will!" she insisted. "I swear I'll remember."

The man's smile never wavered.

"No, once a distortion is resolved, no one remembers what it was. You survived your battles with your mother. So you no longer clearly

remember how you suffered. And that's the way it should be. The value in any distortion's existence arrives only when it has vanished."

Shizuka hung her head. "I don't...really understand."

"That, too, is as it should be."

The man took her hand.

The initial fanfare had passed, and the music had settled down to a lovely tune.

"So what about you? Aren't you lonely? Not being remembered?"

At Shizuka's question, the man made a strange, asymmetrical expression, half smiling, half playing dumb.

"Our real selves have long roads ahead of them. I doubt I'll have time to feel sorry for myself once I'm gone."

The man kissed the back of Shizuka's hand.

She suddenly felt extremely sleepy. The world around her began to blur.

"Oh...oh..."

Her lids felt heavy as lead, and, unable to keep them open, she began to sway. But there was one last thing she wanted to ask. She forced herself to get the words out.

"Wh-where...where are you?"

His voice came one last time as the world faded.

"I am everywhere, and I am nowhere."

And Shizuka woke up.

"...!"

She sat bolt upright, as if slapped. But she couldn't remember what woke her.

"H-hunh?"

She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. But there was no need. She was fully awake, her mind alert. She felt like she'd been

dreaming, but that sensation was fading rapidly as she took in the reality around her.

The lights were back on inside the Moon Temple. The unconscious people were slowly waking up.

The first thing she did was make sure her son, Makoto, was with her.

“Mm, mm...” He was mumbling in his sleep.

She pinched his cheek, lightly.

“Makoto. Wake up, Makoto.”

She shook him, and his eyes fluttered open.

“Mm..mmm? Hunh? Mom?”

“That’s right. Who’d you think it was?”

“O-oh, it was amazing! Boogiepop just went *snap* and Zoragi...!”

Still half-asleep, Makoto began talking excitedly, waving his arms around. Shizuka had no idea what he was talking about, but she smiled and nodded.

Makoto was still half in his dream, and part of her was extremely jealous of that.

The overture was still echoing through the Moon Temple.

5:02 P.M.

Hah... hahh... hahh...!”

I, Michimoto Sakiko, was still climbing upward in the direction Boogiepop had gone. But I was at my limit. I was out of breath, and there was a pain in my side. I was clearly not getting enough exercise.

“I... I can’t...”

I staggered, my breath rasping. I was higher than anyone else had made it, and so I was all alone.

There was some music playing. The lights were back on, and so was the air conditioning. I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like everything was over. Boogiepop must have done something.

I remembered Niitoki Kei, suddenly. That girl must be in here somewhere, too. I had a sudden desire to see her. The way I felt now... I’d be able to talk to her. For real.

“I... I gotta say sorry...”

I felt like I should.

Then, from above me, I heard the sound of something being forced open.

“Ah...!”

I staggered to my feet, and headed toward the noise.

And found Boogiepop forcing open the doors to the elevator. The elevator itself wasn’t there, just a sheer drop to the bottom.

“Um...!” I said.

It turned towards me and said, “Hello.”

“Is... is it over?”

“Yes. There’s no more need for me.”

“Oh...”

I considered asking who it had killed, but it didn’t seem like the right time.

“Farewell,” Boogiepop said, and turned back to the elevator.

I panicked. I felt like I had to say something else.

“Um...! Er, well...”

“What is it?”

“W-will I see you again?”

Boogiepop looked rather surprised. “I believe you should be hoping you never see me again.”

It had a point.

But I stuck to my guns.

“Th-then...if... just if. If I become your enemy?”

“Mm?”

“L-Like you said, this world isn’t always good. But...I... I still think... I may not be great, but, but even so, I want the world to revolve around good things. That’s not the way you think, is it? So I might still become your enemy.”

I wasn’t even sure what I was saying myself.

“.....”

Boogiepop stared back at me, saying nothing. I met that gaze, and kept on talking.

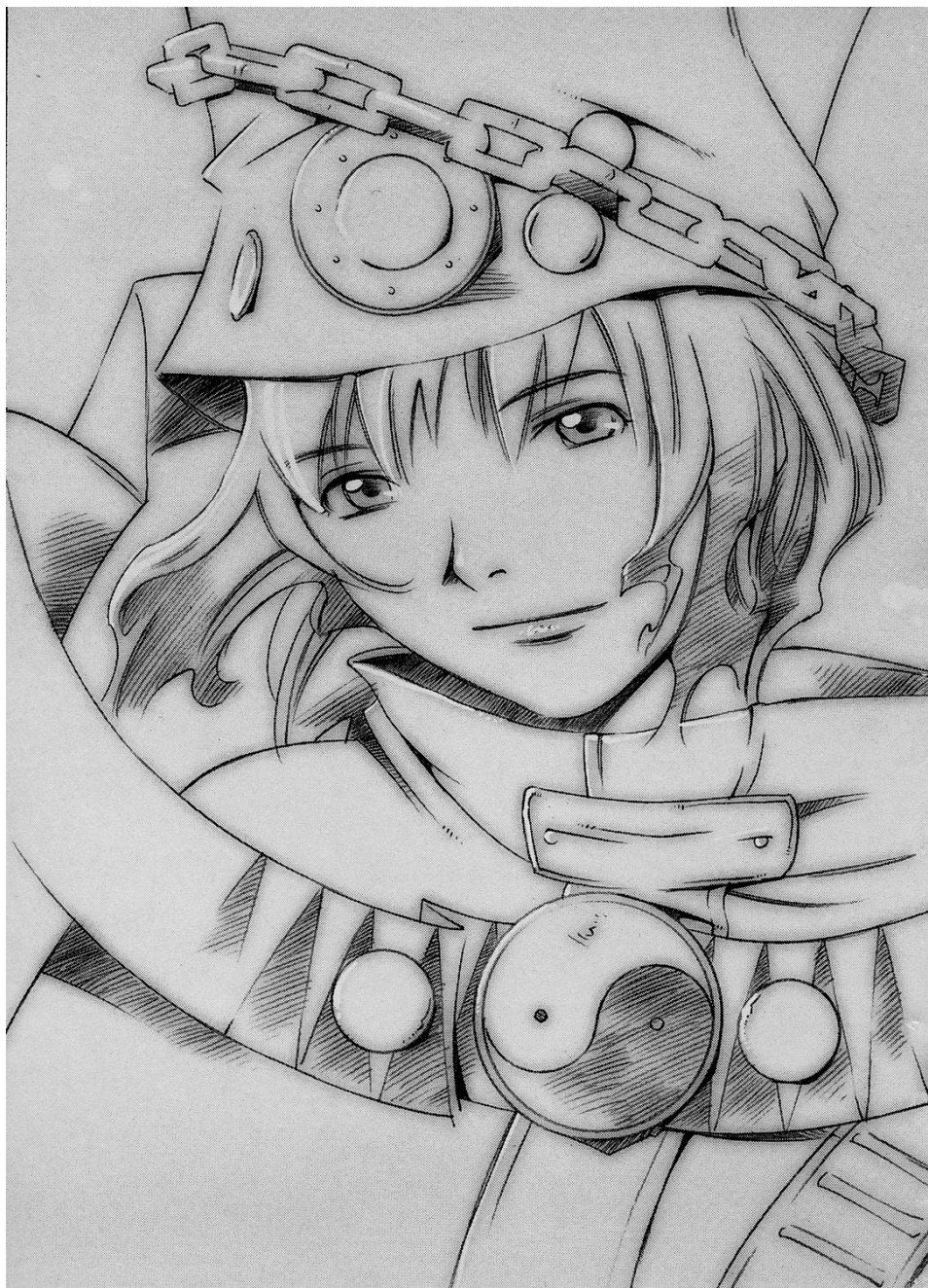
“I-If I do become your enemy, will you appear before me again? Is that a way I could meet you?”

“You do not fear the reaper?” it said, amused.

“Nope! Not one bit!” I said, laughing at myself.

A moment later, I felt like I saw something genuinely unusual. Something few people have ever witnessed.

Boogiepop smiled.



“In that case, I promise to show you no mercy.”

It turned its back on me.

Before I had a chance to yelp, it flung itself down the elevator shaft.

I ran over to the edge, but by the time I looked down, there was no sign of it.

Boogiepop had vanished without a trace.

“.....”

I stood rooted to the spot, feeling empty inside.

Then I heard a familiar voice behind me, and someone running in my direction.

I turned around, and saw Takeshi coming my way. The boy I’d come to the Moon Temple with.

“I... I finally found you... you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Takeshi was covered in sweat, despite the cold. Had he really run all the way up here?

“I... I mean...all this weird stuff happened, and I couldn’t find you, so I started looking and...”

He was panting the whole time.

“.....”

I just looked at him.

Then I sighed.

“All right, then.”

“Hunh? What?”

I didn’t answer, just took a package out of my pocket and handed it to him.

“...? What’s this? Wait...”

“J-just obligatory chocolate!” I said, sternly. “I mean, even Hina-chan forgave me, so...”

I’d never really liked Valentine’s Day. But now I felt like I could finally accept it.

That music was still echoing through the Moon Temple.

5:06 P.M.

I recognized the music echoing through the Moon Temple.

It was the Overture to the first act of “Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg.”

As if the music was an alarm clock, the unconscious people around me began to wake up. I, Takeda Keiji, was too preoccupied to help them out. I just kept climbing up this giant staircase of a building, looking for Touka. This song was *his* favorite. That clinched it. *He* was here.

It had been pitch black when I’d first come in, so I’d had to feel my way around, but once that the lights came on I found a staff member, shook him awake, and demanded answers. His name tag read Shinozaki.

“Hey! Wake up!”

“Mm... mmm? Hazuki, you know I...”

He was still half-asleep. Annoyed, I shook him harder.

“Snap out of it, man! Where do they set the music?”

“H-hunh? Wait, what was I doing?”

“Telling me where this music is set!”

He blinked at me.

“U-um, pretty sure the control room is the boss’s office, at the top.”

That was enough for me. I started running.

I was still running. I’d passed a number of couples my age lying on the floor as I went, which just made me run faster.

“Jesus, what is *he* doing?”

I was getting near the top when I turned a corner too fast, and ran right into someone.

“Eek!”

It was a girl. Hastily, I stammered, “S-sorry!”

Then recognized her.

It was Niitoki Kei.

“N-Niitoki?! What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Takeda-senpai!” She didn’t seem that surprised. “What are you doing here, senpai?”

“Well, um...” I hesitated. Not only because I wasn’t sure how to explain it, but also because Niitoki and I had...history. As in, she’d told me she loved me, and things got awkward, and stayed awkward.

But she seemed pretty cheery today.

“It’s Valentine’s Day, isn’t it? Should you really leave Miyashita-san waiting?”

“Hunh? Uh, no, you see...” I stammered.

She snorted. “Oh, God, senpai, you’re hilarious.”

“Uh...hunh?”

“Have you thought I was serious this whole time?”

“What?”

“You know. Seriously, I was just kidding!”

“You...were?” I blinked at her.

“Of course! You were just sooo obsessed with Miyashita-san I thought I’d tease you a little about it!”

“Th-that’s...really?”

“Really!”

“O-oh. Well, then. Oh.”

I was relieved, but also a little disappointed. I wanted to laugh out loud. But I didn’t have time. I shook my head and asked, “S-so, Niitoki, do you know who put this music on?”

“I do!”

“Wh-where are they?”

“Right here.”

“Hunh?”

“I put it on.”

“Wha...?”

Niitoki explained that some dude named Habara had figured out the secret of the Moon Temple, and she'd helped him out, and chosen this song at the end of it.

"Y-you did?"

"Is that weird?"

"Well, no...wait..."

I was really confused now. I hadn't expected this at all. So where was Touka?

"Senpai, are you looking for Miyashita-san? You two have a date today? I'm sure she's waiting right where you agreed to meet."

"No, she's..."

"Maybe... like if you agreed to meet where you first met, and you were waiting literally where you first met, but Miyashita-san's waiting in the café you went to that day?"

I gaped at her.

"Y-you think that's it?"

"Extremely likely," Niitoki said, grinning.

"Oh, crap!"

I was in trouble now.

I mean, that made sense. A story like that would totally explain any disconnect. I could invent that cover story, or she would.

"B-but...no, never mind."

Takeda-senpai was starting to believe it.

I gave him one last push.

"And I bet she's super-pissed by now."

"Yikes."

"You'd better hurry, and be ready to apologize."

I was twisting the knife a bit, I admit. Senpai couldn't handle it. He looked this way and that, and let out a moan.

“Th-then there’s really nothing going on here?”

I nodded.

“R-right. Then I’d better...”

He turned, and ran back the way he’d come.

I sighed, my shoulders drooping.

But he came running back up. When I looked surprised, he said.

“Um, Niitoki...sorry.”

“What for?”

“W-well...I feel like I did you wrong. Maybe I’m just imagining it, but... but either way, sorry. I just felt I should say that.”

“You don’t even know what you’re apologizing for?”

“Yeah, but...anyway, I mean it. I didn’t intend to...but I feel like I might have hurt you, somehow.”

“We’re good.”

“We are?”

“Yeah, it’s in the past.”

I held out my hand. He looked at it a moment, I nodded, and then we shook.

“Thanks. Bye, senpai.”

“Yeah...see you around.”

This time he really did run away.

The hand he’d held trembled.

“Good-bye,” I whispered. There was a single tear running down my cheek.

But that tear was no longer a painful one. There was a note of closure to it. A tear marking the end of things.

“Good-bye,” I said, again.

I was, at last, done nursing that broken heart.

5:09 P.M.

Outside the windows on the Moon Temple's top floor, the sun was setting below the horizon.



I sat in that chair, gazing at the red sky, listening to the music. Just as it seemed to be reaching its peak, it abruptly ended.

The girl who'd woken me up, Niitoki Kei, had picked that piece. She had good taste, I guess. It was certainly a piece designed to wake an audience up.

"But maaan..." I said, still in a bit of a daze.

Niitoki didn't seem to know who I was, but I knew her. Nagi mentioned her a lot. She'd said, "She's way better than me. Someone you can really rely on."

I'd been saved by a girl like that again. I couldn't win.

Shiro was back to normal, thanks to her. He was still out like a light, lying on his side, grumbling in his sleep.

"Well done, sir," I thought. "Enjoy your hard-earned rest."

I couldn't bring myself to be mad at him.

"Still..."

I looked down through the window.

The doors had opened, and people were streaming in and out. It was chaos. I'm sure folks would start pouring into this control room soon.

What did any of it mean, in the end?

Would this all be boiled down to headlines like "Teratsuki Kyoichiro's Final Mad Crime: A Product of Extreme Wealth and Loneliness"? There wasn't one word of truth to that, but perhaps that was what the mastermind behind all of this intended. There were things about him that couldn't be dismissed so easily, but perhaps it was better that they were.

"But it's just so unsatisfying!"

I sank deeper in my chair.

I glanced at my watch, wondering what time it was. It was broken. I must have smashed it on something.

"Tch..."

I looked around for another clock, then remembered that my phone had one.

I took it out of my pocket, and it was off. Whoops, I thought, and then realized why. I'd almost certainly turned it off to force me to solve this on my own.

I turned it back on.

Instantly a call came through. *What?* I thought, and answered.

"Habara here," I said.

But a voice cut me off.

"Kentaro! What the hell are you doing?"

Nagi's voice.

"Oh, Nagi? What is it?"

"What do you think? I've been calling all day! All kinds of shit's happening at the Moon Temple, and you said you'd be there!"

"Oh...I get it."

"Are you okay?!"

"Uh, yeah, more or less."

"Something happened there?"

"Yeah...but it's over now. Everything's taken care of."

"Did you do it?"

"No, well...Niitoki-san bailed me out."

"Kei did? How?"

She sounded confused. I wasn't really sure to how to explain all this, though.

"Don't worry about it, it's all over. I'll explain later. No need for you to come, not anymore."

"You're sure? If you say it's okay, then I guess it is."

"Who knows if you can take my word for it, ha ha ha ha!"

Nagi sighed loudly at my self-deprecating laugh.

"I was worried, you know. You could stand to take things more seriously, Kentaro!"

"Oh, I do."

I was tickled pink she was worried about me, but...I didn't let her know that.

“Kei’s safe, too?”

“Yeah...she left already. Oh, right, Nagi...”

“What?”

“Um, well...”

I felt like that voice was whispering in my ear.

“Why can’t you just tell her?”

“Um...”

“What?”

“Um, well, you see...”

“See what?”

“Um...how’s Masaki doing?”

I sounded so dumb. “Hunh?” Nagi said. “You were just here the other day and ate dinner with him!”

“Oh...oh, right! Ah ha ha ha!”

I let out a hollow laugh.

We exchanged a few more words about where to meet up next, and then hung up.

I felt even more dazed than I had before.

I let out a long, listless sigh.

“I just can’t say it... it just isn’t that easy!”

Maybe I should have gone for the cheap joke? “It’s Valentine’s Day, remember? Got any chocolate for me?” Hmm, not bad...

I looked over at Shiro, where he lay.

“I get it! I do. But it just isn’t that easy, man.”

Shiro’s body remained fast asleep, but his eyes alone popped open, with no light in them. He grinned at me. “I know,” he said.

I sighed again.

“Yeah...” I nodded.

Outside the window, the sunset was almost over. Any moment

now, the last light would be gone.

Heartbreaker II, closed.

And as we wind on down the road
Our shadows taller than our soul

Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven"

Afterword—When The World Ends

(Dramatic title, but there's no deep meaning to it.)

Not to jump right into it, but have you ever gotten so worked up you lost your cool and then totally had it blow up in your face? I have. So many times...both when I was really happy and when I was absolutely furious. The checks on both emotions fail, and the results are...often not worth mentioning. The result is usually me being deeply embarrassed, and looking around for a hole to hide in. But when that happens, I find myself thinking something crazy—"Oh, if only the world would just end right now!" But man, no matter how pathetic I am, that's no excuse for bringing the world down with me. In hindsight, that's perfectly clear, but at the time, I always mean it, and I think that's pretty bad.

But will the world actually end? I had my doubts, but if you look into it a little, you can easily find the answer. If that surprises you, well, you learned something today. Humans have been around for tens of thousands of years, and the world has ended a number of times already. More accurately, we've overcome what was believed to be the end of the world a number of times, but for the people involved at the time, their world certainly did end. Like, this even happened in Japan! The world of the "Unbroken Imperial Line" ended. (If you don't get what that means, ask someone else.) Even this guy named Bradbury wrote a short story about a Native American boy scared by the sight of men with white skin arriving on boats, and called it "Perhaps We Are Going Away." (If you don't know it, ask your nearest old-school sci-fi fanboy.)

"That's not the end of the world! That's just the end of a country or a culture!" you say, being clever. But when we say 'the world' don't we mean 'the part of it we live in'? And if that's overturned, then isn't that the same as the world ending? "But things start up again," you think, but doesn't that just show that when the world ends, we get a do-over? The real meaning of "History repeats itself" is "What happens happens, no use fussing." I mean, if we couldn't try again, then every time in history a world ended, it would have ended for good, and then

what would be the point of putting in all the work to make a world in the first place? You didn't think of the world as the set in a monster movie, just there to get stomped to bits, did you?

An end comes to all things. We can't stop it. The trick to it is to figure out what to do next, and to do that in a world that's busy ending. But since we don't live in a world where a monster will conveniently come along to destroy it for us, we have to be the ones who end things, who destroy things. So if you ever mess up so bad you want to destroy the world you live in out of sheer embarrassment, that's where you have to start. We've got a long road ahead of us, hunh?

(Don't you ever get discouraged, writing stuff like this?)

(...quite frequently, yes.)

(.....w-well, cool, I guess?)

BGM "Come With Me" by Puff Daddy (featuring Jimmy Page)

About the Author

Born in 1968, Kouhei Kadono grew up uncertain about his direction in life. He spent a considerable portion of his early years frittering away his youth before somehow ending up writing novels.

In 1997, Kadono-sensei's first *Boogiepop* novel, *Boogiepop and Others*, took First Place in the Media Works' Dengeki Game Novel Contest. Early the following year, the novel was released to widespread acclaim and ignited the Japanese "light novel" (young adult) trend. Since that time, Kadono-sensei has written thirteen *Boogiepop* novels and several related works such as the *Beat's Discipline* short story collection and the two *Boogiepop* manga series entitled *Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh* and *Boogiepop Dual*. In its entirety, the *Boogiepop* series has seen over two million copies in print and spawned a live action movie and a hit anime series.

In addition to the *Boogiepop* universe, Kadono-sensei's body of literary work includes a wide array of fantasy and mystery novels such as the *Jiken*, *Soul Drop*, *Limited World* and *Night Watch* series.

About the Illustrator

Born in 1970, a native of Osaka, Kouji Ogata spent his early twenties struggling to get enough credits to graduate from Osaka Design School. In late 1996, Ogata-sensei was commissioned by Media Works to illustrate the first *Boogiepop* novel, *Boogiepop and Others*.

At the time, Ogata-sensei was simply a rising star with a distinctive, eye-catching art style, but he was gradually able to further hone his artistic skills with each subsequent work. His watercolor-style paneling seen in the two-volume *Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh* manga series was a particularly high point of his early career.

In addition to providing illustrations for novels and manga, Ogata-sensei has been involved with supplying character designs for anime productions including *Boogiepop Phantom*, *Spirit*, and *Gin-iro no kami no Agito*.

In his free time, he enjoys motorcycles, tennis, and remote-controlled models.



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